

text CHIQUIT TORRENTE photography WINSTON CHUANG
art direction NICCO LIM



Gaurang's favourite spot in Naomi Liora is the Porch Room with its pocket garden (inset). He was photographed in the hotel lobby.

who GAURANG KHEMKA
why HIS DESIGN FOR THE NAUMI LIORA HOTEL BRINGS COLOURFUL LIFE TO ITS DRAB-GREY SURROUNDINGS
he loves CRAB BEEHOON, LAKSA AND PRACTICALLY ALL SINGAPOREAN FOOD
he's frustrated by CONTRACTORS WHO THINK THAT EXECUTING HIS DESIGNS "CANNOT BE DONE"



The renovation of conservation buildings here involves extensive restrictions – designers can't add to or take away from the gazetted facade's original character. So, when a row of restored shophouses is painted a bold orange hue, everyone takes notice (not to worry – it's all within the URA's conservation guidelines). The architect who orchestrated this gutsy move on the Naomi Liora Hotel along Keong Saik Road in the Chinatown area was Gaurang Khemka. "I wanted the hotel to cheekily acknowledge its red-light-district reputation, but in a fresh, fun way – so we went for orange," he shares.

The other nod to heritage that is so visually evident in the hotel is the Peranakan tile pattern. It starts with the contemporary lanterns suspended from the five-foot-way – the motif on the metal frame echoes the orange Peranakan tiles on the floor. Inside, timber screens in the same geometric pattern clad the walls or act as dividers. The screen pattern, Gaurang says, is "a fractal interpretation of the Peranakan tile". Its dark brown finish, illuminated by concealed warm lighting, gives the contemporary interiors a cosy, traditional-with-a-twist feel.

Seeing these heritage-rich details, it's surprising to learn that the designer isn't Singaporean by birth

(he recently became a citizen). Growing up in Delhi, Gaurang was so moved by his secondary school's grand brick structure that he decided to become an architect. He studied architecture and urban design and planning at the University of California, Berkeley, working his way around the world – from Mumbai to Singapore to San Francisco, then Hong Kong – before making his home here in 2006. Before establishing his own practice, Urbnarc, Gaurang worked with prestigious local firms Kerry Hill Architects and HOK.

Gaurang immersed himself in the heritage of Keong Saik Road in order to work such details into the hotel – that's what his design philosophy is about. "Each project's design solution is a response to its unique context. In Naomi Liora's case, it was the street's red-light-district history, and the Peranakan character of the shophouse," he explains. And how did he familiarise himself with Keong Saik Road? "Heritage areas have always appealed to me, especially as a foodie and photo hobbyist. Plus, my office is just around the corner!" he laughs. ●

Naumi Liora is located at 55 Keong Saik Road, tel: 6922-9000.