

Solid as a rock

Tan Chin Tuan had a granite vision for his bank's flagship

MAGNIFICENT Obsession, starring Rock Hudson, was a 1954 Hollywood movie whose title also happened to be how former OCBC chairman Tan Chin Tuan described his passion to build his bank's flagship, the OCBC Centre.

Now 93 and OCBC's Honorary Life President, Tan Sri Tan noted recently: 'I'd planned it 30 years ago. I was acquiring neighbouring buildings as and when I could.'

Soaring skyward 198m from the ground, the 52-storey bank building was Asia's tallest building - outside of Japan - in the 1970s. On a clear day you could - and still can - see Malaysia and Indonesia from its top floors.

Says OCBC's vice-chairman and chief executive officer Alex Au: 'Its timeless design is its greatest appeal. With that, it can still hold its own against other concrete towers staking the landscape here.'

It took a talented mixed team of Singaporean and foreign professionals just five years to complete the \$100 million skyscraper.

Work on the 6,566 sq m site began in Sept 1971, culminating in its launch on Oct 1, 1976 to much popping of champagne corks.

It was one fine day in the early 1970s, recalls Mr Goh Sin Tub, when Tan Sri Tan - then OCBC's chairman - called the latter into his office and nia told him he was putting him in charge of the whole show.

Hired originally as the banker's personal assistant, Goh, now 73, soon became OCBC's assistant general manager and then the project manager of OCBC Centre - or, as he puts it, Tan Sri Tan's 'alter ego' on site.

Up till then, the bank had been housed in the pagoda-roofed China Building, which had been Chinese Commercial Bank's original office since 1912.

Still, when the time came to tear China Building down in favour of OCBC Centre. Tan Sri Tan felt very sentimental about it, albeit keeping a stiff upper lip throughout.

'It was the building in which I built my bank, and a building becomes part of you in a way,' the banker told Mr Goh, sadly.

The usually unruffled OCBC chairman, it seems, found it hard even to utter the two-word eulogy - 'Destroy it' - for China Building.

HE KNEW HE WANTED JUST TWO THINGS...

But destroy one obsession he had to, to make way for another. The first design for OCBC Centre, by a Singapore architect, did not pass muster. 'Not what I'm looking for,' he was said to have sniffed.

In a phone interview with Life! from his home in New York three days ago, the building's eventual designer, Peh leoh Ming, better-known as I.M.Pei, recalled: "Tan Sri Tan issued only two instructions: 'Build me a bank that looks solid as a rock' and 'Here is the budget. Do not exceed it.'

Added Mr Pei, who is 84: 'He was a banker after all, you know. My father was a banker, so I know.' (See story on facing page.)

Other than laying down those two ground rules, he said, Tan Sri Tan was 'quite liberal' and did not impose too many restrictions on his creativity.

Recalls Mr Goh: 'I could almost hear I.M.Pei's mind clicking away as Tan Sri Tan talked.'

The latter's most telling gesture of what he expected OCBC Centre to be was with both arms held up ramrod straight, bent at the elbows and with his fists clenched.

'Solid as a rock,' he stressed. 'It must be solid as a rock.'

So, steel or glass claddings were no-nos. Only granite would do to realise the banker's rock-solid vision.

That gesture may have inspired Mr Pei in part, as his final design was that of a tower of three jutting window segments flanked by two solid pillars - reminiscent of Tan Sri Tan's upheld arms.

If you visit the building today, you will see nine lifts to the east and another nine to the west. all equidistant from each other. Encasing the lifts within each of the two pillars as such was deliberate, to ensure that no office in the building would be windowless.

But even as he nodded approvingly when Mr Pei scrolled out his finished plan, Tan Sri Tan's deep-seated affection for the old green-tiled roofs of the China Building welled up again.

So he asked Mr Pei whether the latter could possibly make OCBC Centre 'look a little more Oriental'.

'I'll think about it,' promised the Asian-American architectural laureate. which was his way of saying Absolutely Not to the great man.

Without, of course, hurting his feelings.

The chinoiserie touches - however slight - would just not be cohesive with Mr Pei's starkly modern design.

Pressed for his version of this, Mr Pei gently declined to comment.

With sense and sentimentality duly seen to, Mr Goh went to work with his 'Bible' - a Stencilled copy of the building contract - tucked under his arm.

The architects and engineers he worked with, admits Mr Goh, had to reduce everything to the simplest terms for him, which was a blessing in disguise because, in doing so, it made them rethink a lot of their plans and assumptions.

And while he had not a shred of experience in building matters, he says he simply followed the bold banker's famous dictum: 'I don't know the answers. I only need to know the questions.'

LOOKING DOWN AT THE RAIN COMING UP

SO, TO hear Mr (Uoh tell it, every concern springing up on site could be distilled down to five questions: 'What is it?', 'What does it do?', 'What else will do?', 'What does it cost?' and 'What is cost-effective?'

In his e-mail interview with Life!, OCBC Bank chairman Lee Seng Wee recalls: 'The sentiment among employees and management at that time was one of great excitement and pride at the progress that had been made on the bank.'

Along the way, the builders discovered just what being on top of the world then meant.

It meant, among other sublime moments, that one could watch falling raindrops swooping back upwards on the building's window panes, buoyed by the breeze below.

When the last bucket of concrete was poured for the building on Jan 8, 1976, an unnamed team manager summed up the historic experience thus: 'If we don't do anything else with our lives, this building, will really have made our lives meaningful.'