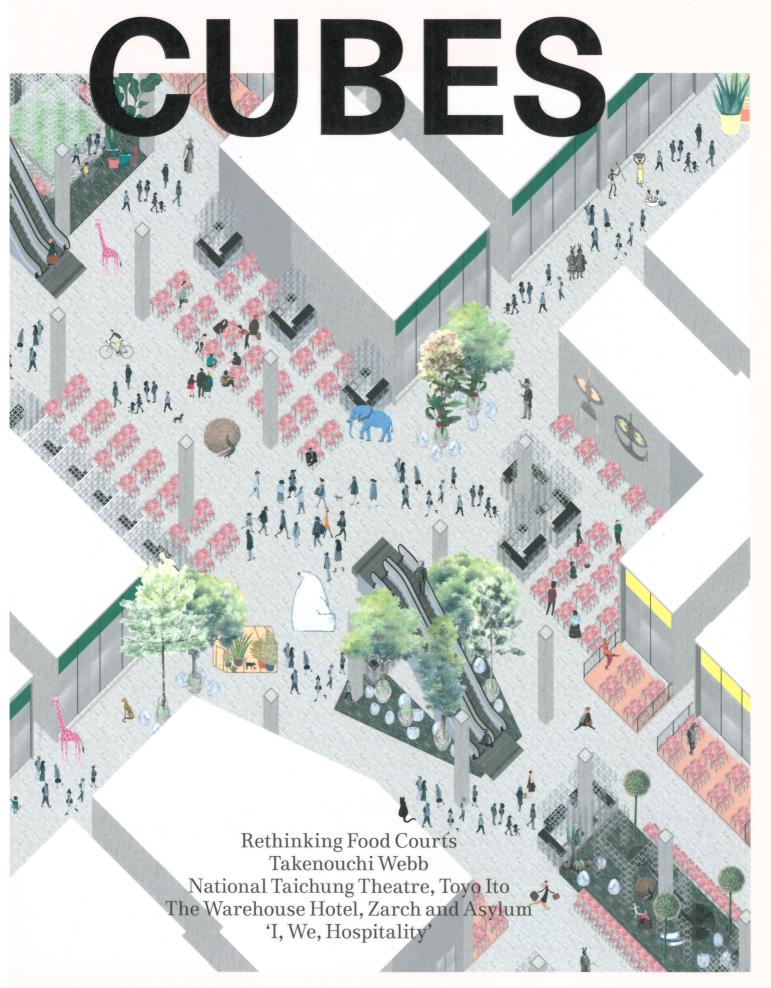
The voice of design in Singapore and Asia.





The Entrepreneur

Text Narelle Yabuka Portrait Photography Justin Loh Project Photography Owen Raggett (courtesy of greymatters)

Alan Barr, founder of Singapore-headquartered design studio greymatters, takes a diversified approach to the hospitality design business and his own restaurant ventures.

n't set out to become a restaurateur," says Singapore-based ican designer Alan Barr. "It just happened. I guess I got tired y consulting," he says, with an energy that fails to dip during 70-hour discussion in his design studio near Mohamed Sultan In April he is set to open the seventh restaurant in which 3 a personal stake. All of them are in the Asia Pacific region, 11 latest one – a Manhattan-style brasserie in Beijing called 20 n – represents his first foray into China.

r's design studio greymatters (which has offices in Singapore, tok and San Francisco) is known for some well known F&B s in Singapore – Tippling Club, Bin 38, Open Farm Community, oKal, and Pasarbella at Suntec City among them – as well as lber around the region including Stacked (Koh Samui), Elbow (Phnom Penh) and Freebird (Bangkok).

s well known is the fact that the studio, which will celebrate hanniversary this year, is also extremely active in the design els and resorts. "The bread-and-butter of what we do at latters is hotels and resorts. They pay the bills. Restaurants are ssion. But because hotels take five-to-six years to complete, e are a young studio, I think most people know us for F&B," he ins. greymatters is currently working on 12 hotels, with some m – Amari Galle Sri Lanka, Robinson Cub in the Maldives and eminyak Resort and Spa in Bali – all inching toward a Q3-Q4 ompletions.

the most interesting side of Barr's story is his belief in the ne diversification of the designer's role in the hospitality arena. d to his own activity as a restaurant owner, he established partners) a restaurant management and development company skin+bones. "There's a blurry grey line in terms of the type vice we provide in conjunction with greymatters. Sometimes natters leads, and sometimes it's skin+bones. We call on assets and forth. Everyone takes the lead in what they do best in a ct," he explains.

Part of Barr's mantra is having the ability to touch all design aspects of a project – interior design, landscape, identity, kitchen design and F&B concepts (including food and beverage menus and recipes). He explains, "We do love to wrap our hands around the planet [of design], but we don't say we have to do everything in a project. I really like to experiment. Part of the skin+bones experiment is to do things in our own projects that clients probably wouldn't allow us to."

Freebird, the Modern Australian-style restaurant recently opened by Barr and his skin+bones partners in an old house in Bangkok, is an ideal example of this approach. "Freebird has been a labour of love," he says. "In fact our design studio is on the second floor. The partners all have their own acumen, but I'm the only designer. Till it opened, none of the partners knew what it would look like. It was a true design-build project. No client could go through a process like that. You can only do it when it's your own project."

Barr's goal is to have a 50-50 split between his own projects and his design consultancy work. And he has his sights firmly set on the broad geography of the region to achieve that. "While Singapore and Hong Kong are leaders in terms of F&B concept and design," he explains, "in terms of business they are increasingly difficult markets because of their high costs. So we're looking at emerging markets."

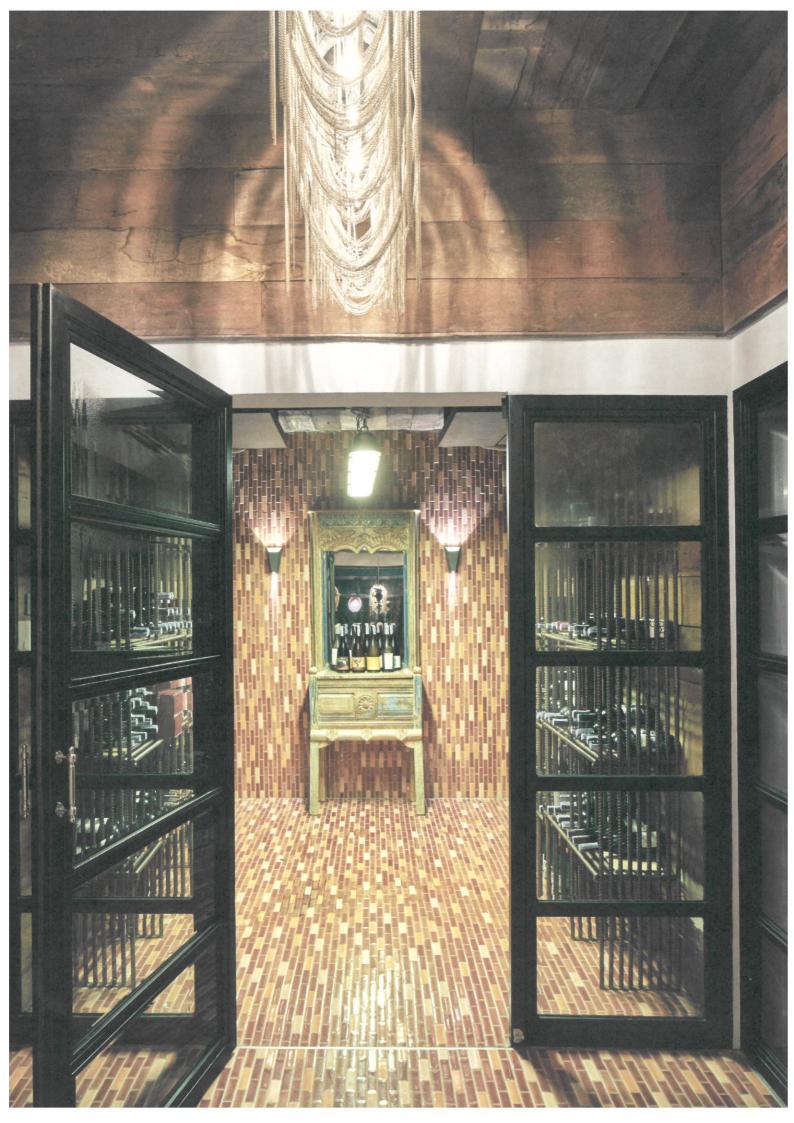
For now, he is enjoying the excellent reception to Freebird. The interior is true to the greymatters style. "We use a lot of architectural materials to create patterns and textures. We do that to an extreme in our own projects. They have to be bold and bright, and we generally do things that have a sense of humour," he summarises. "Too many things are becoming homogeneous these days. The rate of innovation has the possibility of stagnating if we don't flip this trend on its head."

grey-matters.com

Left: Alan Barr's Singapore studio is also his home. His meeting table has a backdrop of shelves where he displays objects collected for projects and for personal fascination.

Page 64: Freebird in Bangkok was created organically, says Barr, based on the skills and interests of the people involved rather than via traditional forms of market research.

Page 65: Barr's domestic kitchen is linked to his studio's meeting space. Meetings with chefs have often ended with experimentations in the kitchen, he says.





versity." Alan Barr.

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