



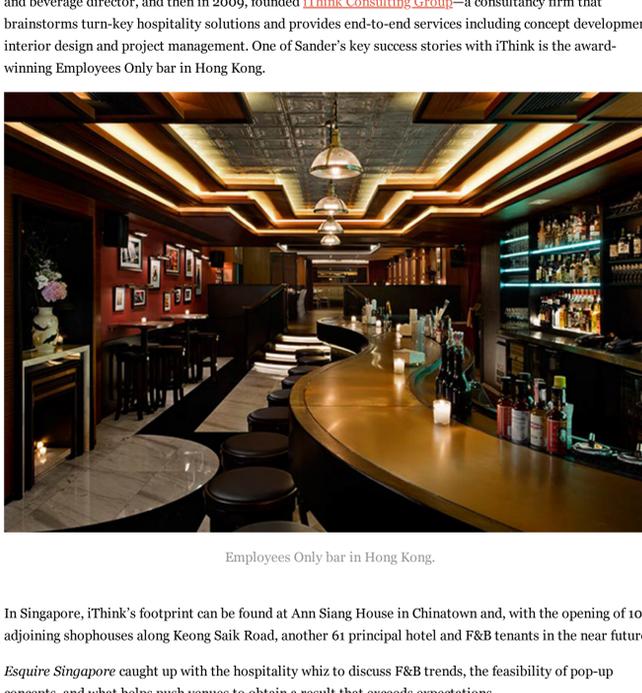
Florian Sander Interview: On hospitality and F&B trends in Singapore

Are we too reliant on hyped food and leisure pursuits?

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WORDS BY DERRICK TAN

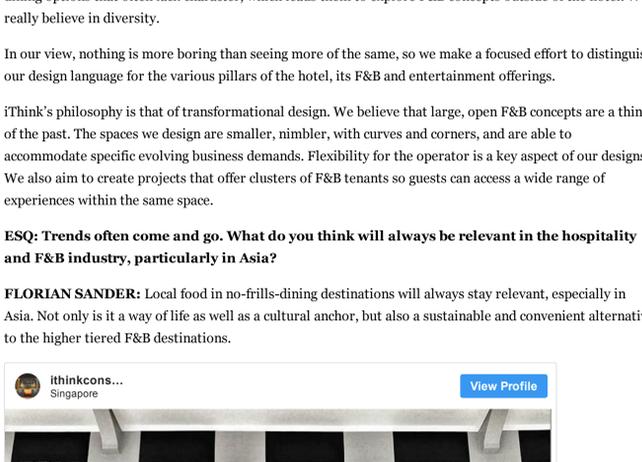


In [contemporary culture](#), everyone is striving to be relevant. As the adage goes: you're nobody unless you're talked about. In the F&B and entertainment industry, we see this with [restaurants constantly updating their menus](#) to keep up with diners' ever-changing taste buds, and [entertainment venues](#) relentlessly revamping their spaces in a bid to continually excite and attract visitors. It's a hamster wheel out there, and no one knows this better than Florian Sander.



Florian Sander of iThink Consultancy Group.

With 16 years of experience under his belt, Sander is well-versed on the triumphs and trappings of the industry. He developed La Scala at The Sukhothai Bangkok before becoming Hong Kong Jockey Club's food and beverage director, and then in 2009, founded [iThink Consulting Group](#)—a consultancy firm that brainstorms turn-key hospitality solutions and provides end-to-end services including concept development, interior design and project management. One of Sander's key success stories with iThink is the award-winning Employees Only bar in Hong Kong.



Employees Only bar in Hong Kong.

In Singapore, iThink's footprint can be found at Ann Siang House in Chinatown and, with the opening of 10 adjoining shophouses along Keong Saik Road, another 61 principal hotel and F&B tenants in the near future.

Esquire Singapore caught up with the hospitality whiz to discuss F&B trends, the feasibility of pop-up concepts, and what helps push venues to obtain a result that exceeds expectations.

ESQ: Tell us about your role at iThink Consulting Group and how the company has evolved since its inception in 2009.

FLORIAN SANDER: My main responsibilities involve securing new business, staying on top of our existing projects and constantly pushing myself, my team and our clients to achieve the best possible results. On the surface, my job sounds quite straightforward, however, there is so much more to it: virtues such as patience, foresight and perseverance, as well as street skills, are absolutely essential when it comes to managing offices in three different cities.

At its inception, the company was purely an advisory outfit, delivering anything from business planning and research to feasibility studies. Today, this side of the business has become a smaller cog in the bigger clockwork of our turnkey concept and design company.

ESQ: What are some of the emerging hospitality and F&B trends you're seeing in Asia?

FLORIAN SANDER: Asia is a diverse and large market that is shaped by countless fads, trends and idiosyncrasies. iThink approaches each project, market and product with a fresh perspective, which allows us to manage a variety of projects across Asian markets.

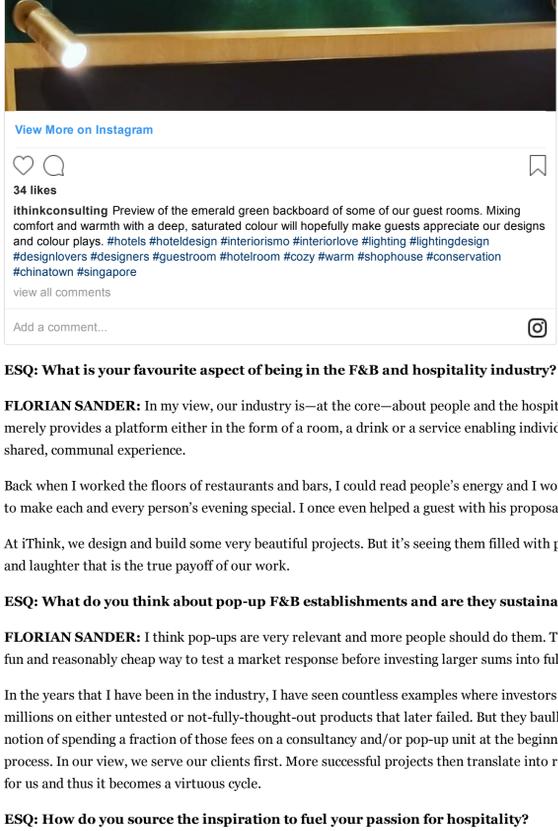
We've noticed that customers in Asia are generally more informed and discerning, and thus have higher standards. Over the past 20 years, we've seen a lot of hotels losing touch with the market, offering guests dining options that often lack character, which leads them to explore F&B concepts outside of the hotel. We really believe in diversity.

In our view, nothing is more boring than seeing more of the same, so we make a focused effort to distinguish our design language for the various pillars of the hotel, its F&B and entertainment offerings.

iThink's philosophy is that of transformational design. We believe that large, open F&B concepts are a thing of the past. The spaces we design are smaller, nimbler, with curves and corners, and are able to accommodate specific evolving business demands. Flexibility for the operator is a key aspect of our designs. We also aim to create projects that offer clusters of F&B tenants so guests can access a wide range of experiences within the same space.

ESQ: Trends often come and go. What do you think will always be relevant in the hospitality and F&B industry, particularly in Asia?

FLORIAN SANDER: Local food in no-frills-dining destinations will always stay relevant, especially in Asia. Not only is it a way of life as well as a cultural anchor, but also a sustainable and convenient alternative to the higher tiered F&B destinations.



ESQ: Besides fulfilling the brief from clients, what challenges and inspires you and your team to achieve the best result for each project?

FLORIAN SANDER: Fulfilling the clients' briefs is not necessarily a challenge but rather, we see it as a springboard for ideas. We have amazing clients and thus pushing the brief here and there is an exercise that improves the final result for both parties involved.

Each market has its own challenges: some are bureaucratic (obtaining a liquor license in Hong Kong, for example, can be extremely challenging), others arise when it comes to site issues and restrictions. An example of this lies in Singapore's conservation shophouse sector, where there are very tight restrictions on what you can and cannot do. This was the case for both our Ann Siang House and 55 Keong Saik projects.

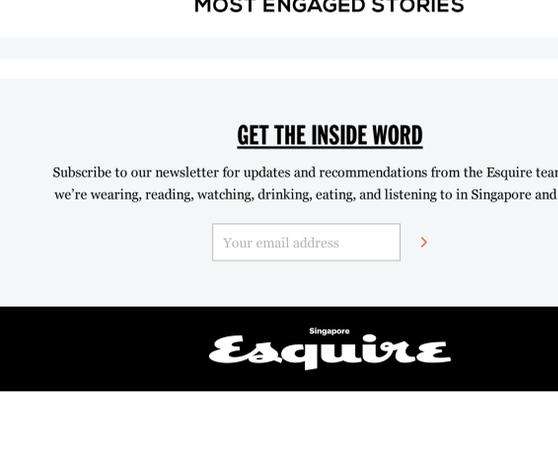
The good thing is that due to our experience in Asian markets, we can anticipate most of the challenges that we will encounter and therefore come prepared with smart solutions. In the case of the Keong Saik project, it involved making the smallest rooms cosy and intimate through the use of ambient lighting and adding skylights and windows wherever possible in the previously window-less attic. We also improved noise insulation while still showcasing the beautiful 100-year-old timber floors and removed all swing doors inside the room in order to not further infringe on an already limited space.

Needless to say that all this has to fit within our client's budget! It is not uncommon that projects of a certain scope overrun on both, time and money... within reason.

ESQ: When and how did you get started in the industry?

FLORIAN SANDER: I worked as a waiter in a local restaurant and bar in Munich when I was 17 in order to earn some pocket money. I loved the work but it wasn't intellectually stimulating enough so I would always calculate each and every one of my guests' bills in my head. On some days my section had over 100 customers, so this kept me on my toes. Initially, the diners thought I was cheating, but after a while word spread about my mental maths and I would receive a nod of respect whenever I informed guests of their total bill.

Two years later, and with support from my parents, I had saved enough money to afford my studies at the Ecole Hoteliere de Lausanne.



ESQ: What is your favourite aspect of being in the F&B and hospitality industry?

FLORIAN SANDER: In my view, our industry is—at the core—about people and the hospitality industry merely provides a platform either in the form of a room, a drink or a service enabling individuals to enjoy a shared, communal experience.

Back when I worked the floors of restaurants and bars, I could read people's energy and I would always try to make each and every person's evening special. I once even helped a guest with his proposal!

At iThink, we design and build some very beautiful projects. But it's seeing them filled with people's energy and laughter that is the true payoff of our work.

ESQ: What do you think about pop-up F&B establishments and are they sustainable?

FLORIAN SANDER: I think pop-ups are very relevant and more people should do them. They are an easy, fun and reasonably cheap way to test a market response before investing larger sums into full-scale projects.

In the years that I have been in the industry, I have seen countless examples where investors would spend millions on either unfractionated or not-fully-thought-out products that later failed. But they baulked at the notion of spending the same fees on a consultancy and/or pop-up unit at the beginning of the process. In our view, we serve our clients first. More successful projects then translate into repeat business for us and thus it becomes a virtuous cycle.

ESQ: How do you source the inspiration to fuel your passion for hospitality?

FLORIAN SANDER: When it's your own business, you quickly realise that nothing happens unless you DO it, so if motivation and inspiration didn't come naturally I would be in quite a bit of trouble. But most importantly, I really believe that when you actually have fun doing what you are doing, inspiration, motivation and happiness are a natural outcome! Doesn't mean all is always rosy, but generally, our projects and our clients are great fun. For that, I am truly blessed.



ESQ: Fill us in about 55 Keong Saik Street. What's the vision?

FLORIAN SANDER: 55 Keong Saik Road has been designed with the desire to be a game changer for the way boutique hotels are designed in Singapore and around Asia. Coming from a boutique hotel background in the early days of my career, I noticed that once a hotel has less than 100 rooms, either the quality of the rooms or the quality of the management would rapidly deteriorate, or, in the case of larger investment sums, that the business case would not be sustainable.

So our vision for 55 Keong Saik Road was to create a financially prudent hotel in Chinatown that charms with its rooms, incite buzz via its diverse F&B offering, and simultaneously provides a decent return to the owners. And, of course, it should make a statement as we don't believe in mediocrity.

ESQ: Any favourite projects from your portfolio?

FLORIAN SANDER: Every project we are chosen to work on is a true joy for us because we believe that a client chooses us as much as we choose our clients, who are all talented, driven and amazing people with the vision of creating something truly unique and wonderful.

Our goal is not to be known for a specific signature design. We just want each and every one of our projects to have an impact. If a project we do looks and feels better in person than in the photos, we would call it a success.

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