



# He Said, She Said



## The Spa Designer

Interview by Peter Myers  
Photography by KQ

Vipavadee 'Pao' Patpongibul is the managing director of P49 Deesign, the company behind a gamut of hotel and spa interiors all over the region.

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You may well have stayed at one of P49’s creations: The Ritz Carlton Bali? The Hilton Hua Hin or the Maldives? Dusit Thani, Bangkok? The Sheraton Krabi or Pattaya? Sofitel Hanoi? You may also have visited a spa of their design: The Oriental Hotel’s Spa, Sheraton and Mandara spas all over Thailand, and the JW Marriott Shanghai? A host of others are under construction, including Turkey (Xanadu), Qatar (Six Senses Spa), Bangkok (Four Seasons), Beijing (Mandara Palm Springs Spa) and Delhi (Six Senses Spa at Imperial Moghul).

The point is that 28 year-old P49 engage in a prolific amount of work, even for an 80-strong company. But, more than that, their designs are incredibly diverse, and don’t stick to any ‘signature’ look. So many four to five-star hotels featuring the hideous 70s and 80s faux-opulent lobbies and outrageously-patterned furniture/ carpets have been unrecognisably revamped into chic lodgings by P49; reflecting the current hunger for minimalism - or in some cases, maximalism - and sharp design.

From hip, city spaces like Bangkok’s Triple-Two, to ethnically-inspired resort spas, it is hard to believe the same team is responsible for P49’s wide-ranging design portfolio, but as Pao explains: “Designing a city hotel’s spa, with its emphasis on space and utility; and a resort’s sprawling spa complex, with its focus on escapism and tranquillity are two very different processes. At a 5000 square-metre spa village we have just designed in Qatar, we aimed to create the ultimate pampering sanctuary; emphasising romance and relaxation. You can’t do that in the city so easily. It is hard to truly chill-out in a city spa when you have booked an hour’s massage after work, before having to rush across town for a dinner engagement. We can be much more extravagant in country retreats where we can consult with the architect regarding the exterior as well as the interior space.”

*Pao stands in the sharply designed reception area of P49’s Bangkok headquarters*



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Pao and her staff have been designing spas ever since their first commission from Mandara Spa at Bangkok’s Imperial Queen’s Park in the late nineties. Since then, she has noticed a gradual change; from the original ‘several treatment rooms and a spa reception’ concept, to increasingly creative set-ups. “World travellers now expect the WOW factor, especially in Asian spas, and we’ve noticed that our spa clients now wish to push the boat out and extend the spa frontier to become niche venues, like medical spa retreats.”

Often, however, it is P49’s advice that turns what would have been a generic hotel or resort spa into the atmospheric utopias spa-goers appreciate so much. Although Asia-based operators realise the importance of a more ‘holistic’ design, it is sometimes more of a struggle in countries where spa culture is still in the ‘bubble-bath’ stage. Pao is currently working with an Australian resort that needed some gentle persuasion that their spa should be the very epitome of escape and tranquillity.

A good example of the client-design process, Pao elaborates, was with the Ritz-Carlton in Bali. “They wanted treatment rooms which simply contained beds, with the locker rooms located elsewhere. We explained that people would feel a lot less hectic if they could relax and switch-off both before and after the treatment in their rooms, rather than being moved around. The resort agreed and the end-result is fantastic. They have recently been voted one of the top three in the world.”

But how, I ask Pao, does one design an escapist fantasy? Is there a formula? “No, but I make sure that my staff are well-versed in the best that hospitality has to offer - I send them off to stay in the best properties in the region, to enjoy the best spa treatments. But for each different client, we try to create both the best visual feeling and the greatest level of physical comfort possible within their physical and geographical parameters, while achieving the best possible functionality.”

And what’s next for a company that has designed the full range of hospitality venues? Pao’s eyes glaze over and she gazes through the smoke of her cigarette: “Well, I am thoroughly enjoying the projects we’re currently involved with in the Middle East and Turkey; and since technology has made communication so much easier, I would really love to extend our portfolio even further afield - to Europe and the United States -despite the frenzied competition.”

After meeting Pao, and appreciating the extent of her experience and energy, I certainly would not like to be her competition. 🌐



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