

## View from the top

Former Raffles International's head honcho Richard Helfer is back with a luxury hotel in a humble neighbourhood of Singapore. Raini Hamdi talks to the chairman of One Farrer Hotel & Spa about his new baby which opened on September 3

# MAKING A CONNEXION

### A luxury hotel in a non-luxury location, Farrer Park, raises a few eyebrows.

Farrer Park is one of the most interesting and centric locations in Singapore...A lot of times when I walk out of a hotel whether in Singapore or New York, I really don't know where I am, it could be anywhere. I think if you ask people why they haven't stayed in Farrer Park, they would say it's because there has not been a five-star hotel there.

### Are you saying just by having a five-star plus hotel is enough to open demand to a location that many overseas visitors aren't familiar with?

No, to drive a destination, you must first understand what the destination does not have and what it has too much of, so you can come in and complement (the offering). Once you've identified that, then you have to totally focus on building a property that is not only the best in the particular area but, being centric located in Singapore, you also have to look at what everyone else in the marketplace is doing.

We don't have the convention size facility of Marina Bay Sands, but we do have a 550 pax ballroom and three meeting rooms and fibre optics cabling running through Farrer Park Hospital's 18 operating rooms and our In-

stitute of Nutrition (a culinary studio) so we can actively go after specialist medical-related/lifestyle meetings. By nature those meetings are not large and we can cater for them better than anyone else in the market, because of our ability to enable technology to make our facilities state-of-the-art.

### Why Farrer Park, and how did the whole Connexion at Farrer Park come about?

Farrer Park is probably one of the last bastions in the heart of Singapore that has not been overly developed as a hotel destination.

When our company, The Farrer Park Company, tendered for the site, it was a large 'white site' (a planning concept which allows developers more flexibility to optimise land for various uses without incurring hefty charges), 40 per cent of which was required to be a hotel. Part of the investors is a group of medical doctors and their dream was to build the best private hospital in Singapore, so the rest of the white site became in time, The Farrer Park Medical Centre (home to more than 200 medical specialists) and Farrer Park Hospital (one of the first private hospitals to be built ground-up Singapore after 30 years).

I came in shortly there after. Originally, the thinking was the hotel would be dependent on the hospital and medical centre, but having been on both hospital and hospitality boards, it has been shown, as with other lifestyle businesses, that they are separate business models. Over

the years, we've conceptualised and developed many mixed-use developments; I've never once believed that an office building, for example, could not survive by itself without the condominium, shopping mall, hotel or hospital. They will find the natural synergy among each other, but you don't go into a mixed-use development with the expectation one would shore up the other.

### So the hotel is not dependent on the hospital/medical centre for occupancy?

The hospital and medical centre are like a good corporate account for the hotel and will probably comprise 23-25 per cent of the hotel's business mix – families and relatives staying pre-, during or post-treatment. It's good seed business. The remainder 75 per cent is based on our ability to attract corporate, MICE and leisure travellers to One Farrer Hotel & Spa, as a five-star venue in an exciting new area of Singapore.

### Exactly my point, what has the area to offer; why did you decide on a five-star positioning?

Three-star hotels are what everyone has built there to date and the way I look at it is it's only by having a five-star hotel that you can control the nature of the business.

I know that for so many of the hotels we have built, be it in Asia, Europe, the US or what have you, it is us who drive the market. And we drive the market by concept, by understanding what is re-

## 10 NEED TO KNOWS ABOUT RICHARD HELFER

■ **Who's in your family?** 1 wife; 1 mother; 3 god sons; 2 sisters; 9 nephews and nieces.

As to family pets we have a pond full of Japanese Koi.

■ **What do you do for fun?**

Collect antiques, artwork and artefacts from destinations in which we visit and are doing projects.

■ **Your ideal vacation?**

A minimum of two nights in the same hotel and being able on at least one morning to sleep in!

■ **How do you book your own leisure trips?**

I usually book into destinations that I have visited earlier and did not have enough time to properly explore.

■ **What are you reading right now?** *The River of Lost Footsteps* by Thant Myint-U.

■ **How do you stay healthy?**

By being happy in what I do, who I work/spend time with and running on my new treadmill.

■ **Favourite food?**

A combination of comfort foods and new 'foodie' finds during my travels.

■ **A bad habit you cannot kick?**

Delicious desserts paired with good wine :-)

■ **Your pet peeve, something that never fails to annoy you?**

Those who are neither inquisitive nor strategic in their thinking/actions.

■ **Most people don't know that you can...**

Fortunately most people do know that I cannot sing/dance well and so do not ask me to do so.

quired to make the market work, with a bit of passion thrown in to ensure that we achieve what we said we were going to do.

Plus, if you look at the exorbitant land costs in Singapore, it is a shame if you under-build.

### Could you compare this with any of hotel/lifestyle projects you've done before?

We've done over 100 hotels and resorts, and most don't repeat themselves. Even if it's two heritage hotels in Cambodia, they aren't the same because we prefer not to do a cookie-cutter approach in creating 'total environment' hospitality experiences.

It is exciting to again be doing a project in our own hometown. At a time when people sometimes say Singapore is a mature destination and there's nothing exciting coming up anymore, we can prove them wrong by taking one of Singapore's unique heritage districts and adding an exciting lifestyle component to it.

### So will it be Raffles standard?

(Pause) We're a five-star plus hotel and we'll deliver a five-star plus quality. In the recent past, we had many times spoken of the need to meet and exceed guest expectations. I think with the new generation, and with the technology that we have today, we must also proactively anticipate what our guests want. So that's the new part that wasn't there – before if we took care of the guests and wowed them on a few things, we would exceed their expectations. Now we must anticipate what the guests themselves do not even know they want.

And the things that had served us well 10-15 years ago are not necessarily what the market considers important today, plus they can more effectively be accomplished today by enabling a higher level of both product and service through the intuitive use of technology.

### Why did you decide to be independent than chain-managed?

In an established market like Singapore, we can expect 70 per cent of our business to come online. Thus one of the draws of hotel management companies, the ability to provide a proprietary reservation system, is no longer such a benefit.

Secondly, we want to build a unique brand for us, not for somebody else, so we can spend our energies creating a product with a difference and we can best tell our own unique story. We've also linked up with Preferred (Hotels Group), which is a leading worldwide hotel marketing affiliation, not a cookie-cutter company and does not sign up hotels indiscriminately.

### Is this the first hotel that you've had done since the Raffles days?

We have, and continue to undertake a number of hospitality, lifestyle and mixed-use projects focused mainly in greater Asia, but One Farrer Hotel & Spa is the first hotel project we have conceptualised, developed and implemented in Singapore since Raffles City, Raffles Hotel and the Merchant Court Hotel.

Singapore being our home base makes this project even more special.

To drive demand to a destination, you must first understand what the destination does not have and what it has too much of, so you can come in and complement (the offering).

