

Breaking New Ground

The Country Club's architect puts people at the heart of her buildings



Moira Moser pictured at the Country Club she helped to create.

A legend in the world of architecture, Moira Moser set up M Moser Associates in Hong Kong in 1981. Since then the company, which is renowned for its people-centered approach, has gone from strength to strength with its multi-services approach. It now has more than 1,300 staff spread across 30 locations in four continents, and has scooped more than 170 global awards.

One of Ms. Moser's standout projects is our very own Country Club. The project, which involved a challenging trans-Pacific partnership with a U.S. firm, had its grand opening on July 4, 1987. Ever since, it has been offering members a home-away-from-home by the sea. That's where we sat down with Ms. Moser to discuss her work, reflect on her many years in Hong Kong, and gain a deeper understanding of the Club's unique and colorful design.

Q: When did you first realize you wanted to be an architect?

A: I decided when I was nine years old, and it's been the only thing I've ever wanted to do. I used to look at my mother's Better Homes & Gardens magazines, and gaze at the pictures of beautiful houses. And when I discovered that somebody *designs* these houses, I thought, "I could do that. I would love to do that."

Q: You are known for being an avid traveler. How have your overseas adventures influenced your work?

A: I grew up in California and attended Scripps College in Claremont, to study humanities and fine arts. Scripps didn't offer an architecture course, but I knew that's what I wanted to do. So, I traveled to Hamburg, Germany, to study architecture. After that, I embarked on a "grand tour" of the continent to see its great buildings. In those days, in the late 1950s, it was relatively safe and easy to go from youth hostel to youth hostel, so that's what I did.

I ended up in Istanbul, which I found fascinating, because I hadn't known anything about the Middle East before that point. I went to the university there, and asked if I could study architecture. They nearly fell off their seats, but they said yes! After that, I went back to the U.S. and completed my architectural studies at Berkeley.

The most important lesson I learned on my travels is that although cultures vary, we are far more alike than we are

different, in terms of how we experience the world, and what we need to thrive. And that understanding has shaped my approach to creating buildings and other facilities. Rather than designing in a particular style for a particular place, I always approach projects by thinking about people's needs, and their aspirations, and how they will respond to the space and use it effectively, and with pleasure.

Q: Please tell us how you first came to Hong Kong.

A: I'd been living and working in Iran, but had to leave in 1979 because the Revolution was imminent. I'd already visited Hong Kong as a research scholar for an international organization called the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat. During that trip, I'd met with Hong Kong's three major architectural firms and they'd all said to me, "if you come back, we have a job for you." So when I left Iran, I came here and joined Wong Tung and Partners.

Hong Kong was a boom town in those days. It was like the Wild West! Everything was under construction with a lot of the big residential and commercial developments going up.

Q: You set up M Moser Associates just two years after you landed. Such a bold move!

A: In Iran, I'd been a partner in a small firm. Having been in a position like that, I knew I wanted to stay in charge. I used to attend a lot of American Chamber of Commerce lunches and through that, realized how many American organizations desperately wanted to do business in China. They all wanted to set up offices in Hong Kong, which was the entrepot between the West and the mainland. And I thought "Oh, *that's* an opportunity."

We were tiny to start with – the company had only three people initially. But we were really well-positioned for the American market, and we got

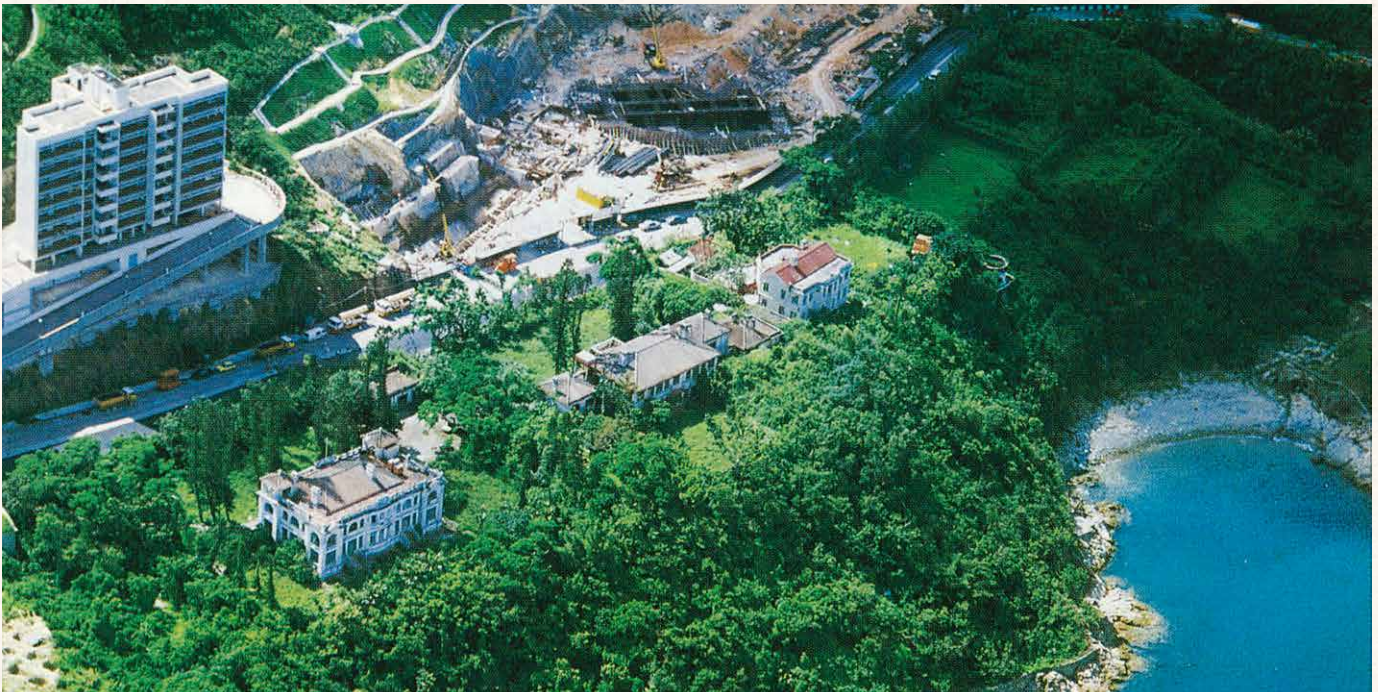
commissions pretty quickly. Over time, we've expanded locations and capabilities, building a global presence to support clients around the world. I'm an entrepreneur by nature, which helps.

Q: How did you win the contract to design and build the Country Club?

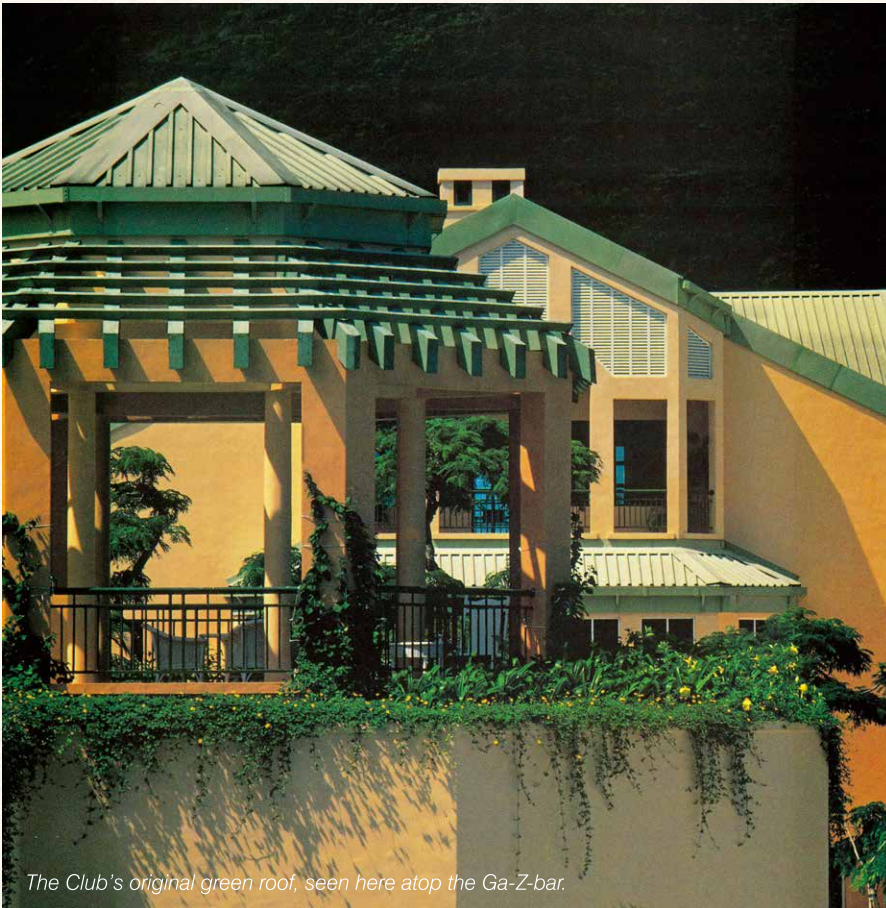
A: We pitched in partnership with the architect William Turnbull, who was based in San Francisco.

I think we won because instead of focusing on just the practical aspects of the construction, we prioritized the sentiment of the design. We wanted to create a wonderful home away from home for American families, outside the city center and with a beautiful garden. That's why we were chosen – we were speaking the Club's language.

When developing the project, I was inspired in part by the wonderful old mansions that



Before the Country Club was built, the Tai Tam site was home to three villas.



The Club's original green roof, seen here atop the Ga-Z-bar.

wealthy families keep as summer homes on the East Coast. I love the novel *The Great Gatsby*, so it's often on my mind.

My firm worked collaboratively with Bill's across the whole project. We brought local expertise to the table. For example, Bill had conceived of Hong Kong being like the Caribbean, and sunny all the time. But we have a much more varied climate here. That's why we picked the salmon color for the exterior, because it looks good on gray days as well as in sunshine. Our goal was to create a cheerful, charming and inviting environment. We chose forest green for the window frames, rather than white, so you'd still get a color pop in low light.

We created the green roof out of respect for our neighbors in the high rises across the street. The original site was very green, and we wanted to maintain that nice aspect for them.

Another motivation was that we didn't want the place to look like every other club. And a top priority was the trees.

Q: Tell us more about the trees.

A: The site was home to some beautiful flame-of-the-forest trees, which are native to Hong Kong. We were determined to keep them, so when we realized one of them was situated right in the middle of the garage's exit driveway, we decided to move it five feet over. What an operation! A big hole was dug around the tree, then it was picked up with a crane, very carefully,

and replanted, successfully, in another hole. I was on site keeping my fingers crossed throughout the process.

Sadly, there were a number of Norfolk pine trees on the site that we were unable to save. We cut them down and used the wood for the fireplace in the lounge. When word got out in the American community, people who had fireplaces in their homes came to collect logs to burn.

Q: I understand the budget was quite modest. Was that a challenge?

A: The budget was what you'd usually get to build a warehouse! We managed to keep costs down by using locally-sourced materials, such as steel for the window frames, and red cement tiles for the floor. We employed local artisans to do the stenciling designs on the beams in the original dining rooms.

Originally, we'd planned for a two-level car park but we didn't have the budget, and the Club felt they couldn't go back to the bank to ask for a bigger loan. So that's why there's only one level of parking.

As well as budget, the other big challenge was how to work hand-in-hand with Bill, over such a long distance. We had no computers then, and it wasn't possible to fax documents effectively, so every weekend we'd send the drawings back and forth with couriers. Looking back, I have no clue how we managed it – but we got it done!

Q: What are your memories of the opening ceremony? Was it emotional?

A: It was, and I also remember that I got thrown in the swimming pool, as did Bill.



The view from the aerobics room in the Club's early days.

My best memory is standing out on the patio overlooking the lawn, and seeing all these little girls turning cartwheels on the grass. That scene represented perfectly the environment we had set out to create and I remember thinking: "We did the right thing."

Q: You've also been a Club member for over 40 years?

A: I joined The American Club in 1981, when it was still in St. George's Building, and before either of the current Clubs existed. In 2020 I became a Senior Life Member, because I'd been an active member for nearly 40 years.

Early on, I used the Club mostly for lunches and meetings. My firm was very small at the time, and I was doing a great deal of the marketing myself, so I would meet with potential clients, many of whom were Americans, at the Club. It was a much better option than going to a restaurant that didn't have any particular meaning for them.

Nowadays I use it mostly for fun. I love eating a meal out on the terrace at the Forty Niner when the weather is fine.

I think the Club community is much younger than it used to be, and the culture is less formal. I know that it will continue to change. In even 10 years' time it won't look like it does now. I'm happy to see it evolve, but I hope the salmon exterior and the green window frames will stay the same.



Moira Moser will give a talk at the Town Club on May 27 as part of our Centennial Speaker Series. Join to find out more about her fascinating life and her groundbreaking work.

And there's a special treat in store for fellow fans of *The Great Gatsby*. Put on your dancing shoes to celebrate fellow Centurion for *The GREATEST Gatsby* at the Town Club on June 7, 2025, when we'll be celebrating 100 years of this iconic novel.



Share your Memories with Us

Project 100 aims to establish a permanent digital archive that complements and helps to fill the gaps in the Club's physical collection. We'd love you to help our mission to boost our collection and share members' memories with the community.

We're calling out for contributions of memorabilia, artefacts, and photos. Submissions can be digital or physical, in which case the Club team will arrange a scan or photograph of your artefact and return it to you.

We're especially interested in the following:

- Club related items during WW2
- Magazines prior to 1976
- Old photos of traditional events including Halloween, Thanksgiving, Fourth July, grand Town/Country Club openings
- Pictures or trophies from the Club's sports programs, events and competitions

If you have time and interest and would like to help, please reach out Centennial@americanclubhk.com.

Find out more

