



the *Midas* touch

Chelsey Baker speaks to Sammy Lee, the UK's leading property tycoon, to discover what's next for the man with the Midas touch

Sammy Lee is an extraordinary individual: an inspired visionary for whom everything he touches seemingly turns to gold. Here in the UK he is perhaps best known as the Hong Kong-born entrepreneur and creator, designer and developer behind The Knightsbridge: the award-winning development which is now recognised as the leading residential development in London, with total sales achieved of over £600m.

With a varied career in corporate law, commercial finance, property development, hotel investment and independent media, he has enjoyed unprecedented levels of success; but then he is a man of exceptional insight. Sammy became the corporate finance specialist for a number of Hong Kong- and US-based consortia, including owners of The Renaissance chain of hotels who own the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles of *Pretty Woman* fame, and he rescued the troubled Sun's Group Ltd. from liquidation, and subsequently restructured it into a coking coal conglomerate worth in excess of US \$150m.

His foresight led to his responsibility for overseeing the worldwide Renaissance Hotel chain; for which he turned a listed office block in Holborn into the renowned five-star Chancery Court Renaissance. He also invested in Media 8, a Canadian independent film production and distribution company; his first major movie project, *Monster*, subsequently won Charlize Theron the Oscar for Best Actress in 2004. By any standard, these are all outstanding accomplishments.

Furthermore, his international reach knows no limitation; forays into the North America market led him to develop Trump Plaza in New York for his friend and golfing partner Donald Trump, another gifted entrepreneur who once said of him: "Sammy Lee is a great businessman. He understands people, he keeps them focused whilst being nice (whilst developing) one of the most successful developments in the history of New York City."

However, Sammy's life wasn't always so illustrious: Without the benefit of a privileged background and with

a scholarship for support, he came alone to England aged just 17. Once here he commenced a panoply of jobs: hotel porter, petrol-pump attendant, barman, shoe-shop assistant, a Burger King chip-fryer and part-time postman; and it was from this perspective that he developed a flair for detail and sheer hard work. He eventually graduated in law and returned to Hong Kong as a fully UK qualified lawyer from which his career took off.

Known to value his privacy, Sammy is disinclined to bask in the limelight: "I don't want to promote myself, it's not my style. I could be gone tomorrow to start something new somewhere in the world..." – an unassuming sentiment which underlines my delight in securing this interview.

The first thing that struck me upon meeting Sammy was his appearance; he has a physical presence that defies his stature; he moves with innate athleticism and possesses the physique and energy of a man half his age. He will readily declare a predilection for golf and badminton, but it came as no great surprise to learn that he is an experienced martial artist.

Sammy has extensive training in Wing Chung Kung Fu, Tai Kwon do and Muay Thai; all disciplines that require deep personal commitment, determination and perseverance; characteristics which reveal so much more about the man than a self-evident talent for business. There is something of a dichotomy here; he may be shrewd, incisive and intellectually agile, but there is no ego on display; he is personable, humorous and very approachable. In short, Sammy Lee is a fascinating individual who combines a natural charm with erudition and a steel-trap mind. He possesses the unassuming, easy-going confidence of a man who has nothing left to prove, whilst remaining forever driven by the next big challenge.

So what does the future hold for this remarkable man? Well, I understand that he is currently working on a series of exclusive one-off developments in London, set to be amongst the most expensive turn-key residential developments in the world. Moreover, he has innovative plans to surpass the established concept of the private members club. Inspired by the success of The Knightsbridge, he intends to exceed all levels of exclusivity, quality and service and to introduce standards of excellence that will endure throughout the next decade and beyond. ■

a fascinating individual who combines a natural charm with erudition and a steel-trap mind