

# Building with heart

BY ELENA TUNKU SHERIE

When looking at a building, it is easy to overlook the idea behind it. What was the inspiration for the design? Why was it built in that way and who was the person behind the design?

*City & Country* recently met up with French architect Martin Duplantier to talk about his works and the inspirations behind them. He was in Kuala Lumpur for the Archidex event, held in June at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, where he was one of the speakers.

Of French and Belgian descent, Duplantier comes from a family of architects and was exposed to the world of architecture from a young age.

"My father is an architect, my siblings are also architects. I couldn't get away from it. I tried going in a different direction but here I am," he says wryly.

He recalls many trips with his family when growing up, where the examination of buildings was a common practice.

"Even when we were on trips, we would look at the buildings through an architectural point of view. It was ingrained in us. For example, what the design elements are, does it fit with the area that it is in and so on."

Duplantier studied in France and Spain, and has worked in California, the US, and London, the UK. Apart from architecture, he also studied business and urban design. "I believe this is what sets me apart from other architects. I am able to look at and assess a building from different perspectives."

After completing his diploma in architecture in 2006, Duplantier worked as an architect at David Chipperfield Architects in London, where he was in charge of international competitions. During his tenure there, he won the HEC Paris Business School competition, an international competition, in partnership with David Chipperfield Architects.

After his training, Duplantier started his own company in 2007 — Martin Duplantier Architects. Now a well-known architect, he is often invited to give talks on architecture as well as share his own experiences.

At Archidex, Duplantier spoke about the works that he has done that are in line with RejuvenATION — the theme at this year's event.

One of the buildings he highlighted was the Vista Tower development in Rwanda, Africa, as he felt that it resonated with the culture in Malaysia.

"I've been told that the building looks like Swiss cheese. It's basically a mixed-use development with retail, residential and office floors. The project will also have a feature where heat from the building will be converted into energy, basically reducing the heat," he tells *City & Country*.

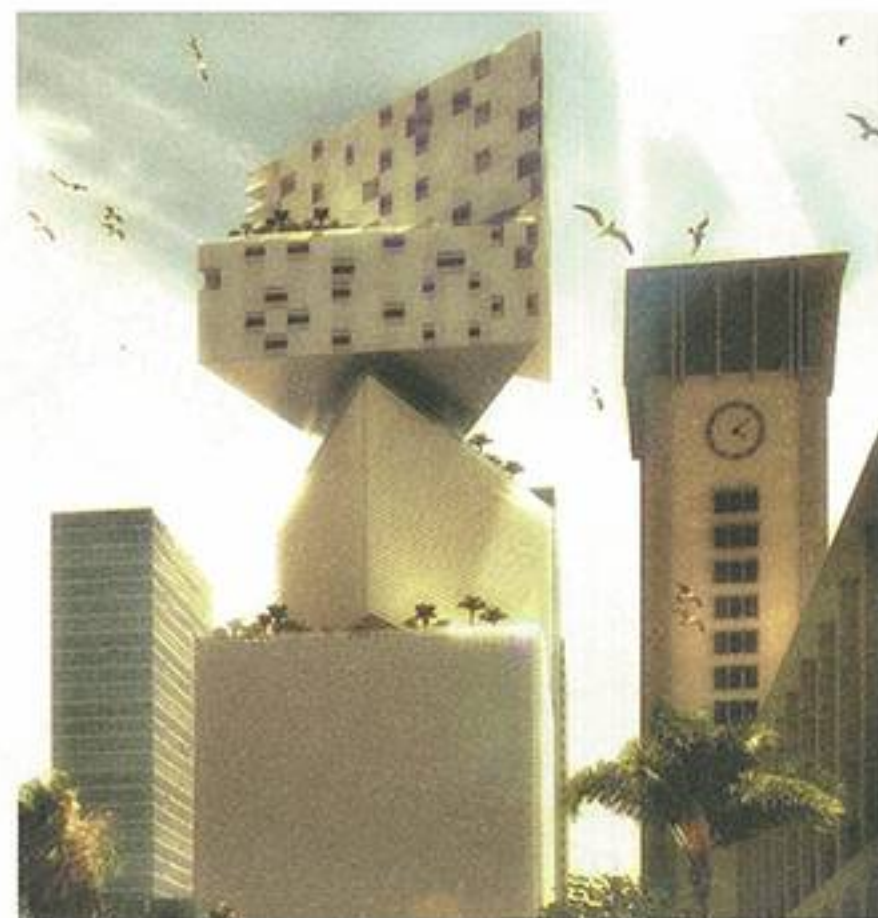
He says all four blocks of the building will be oriented to show different views. The building will be 45,000 sq m wide and 50 storeys high, with two floors for retail, 24 storeys of office space and 24 storeys of residential units. The office and residential spaces are 24,000 sq m each. Vista Tower is expected to be completed in two years' time.

Duplantier also talked about his other projects, such as the mosque in Bordeaux and the HEC campus project in Arago district, both in France. The latter project experiments with innovative ways of recycling and involves students from the Science and Technology University.



PICTURES BY MARTIN DUPLANTIER ARCHITECTS

Some of Duplantier's projects in France include (clockwise from top) Moov Access in Arago, HEC in Jouy-en-Josas and Vista Tower in Rwanda, Africa



Below: Duplantier: To me, good architecture is something that has been adapted to the culture and climate of that area



LEE LAY KIN/THE EDGE

So, what does Duplantier define as good architecture?

"To me, good architecture is something that has been adapted to the culture and climate of that area. It's about how people operate."

He explains that in most architecture, a lot of the designs get repeated and it is not always the fault of the architect.

"Take some of the areas in France. Architecture there has come a long way over the last few decades. But it has all been photocopied, all the same housing units."

"Sometimes you get clients who have seen a design that they like and want that particular design to be replicated. This is especially common with major corporations."

He adds that architecture is about expressing oneself and being brave enough

to try out new concepts and ideas. "There's a lot of fun to be had with vernacular architecture."

So, what inspires Duplantier's designs? Everything, he says.

"The trips I make, the people I meet and the journeys I take, they all inspire me. Every experience is different and that's what good architecture is about. Not repeating the same thing over and over again."

"The whole idea is to create something that adds to the uniqueness of the place, so that when you think of that certain design or building, you automatically think of the place too."

Duplantier also gives his thoughts on the architecture in Malaysia. "I would say that the architecture in Malaysia is rather good, it is dynamic and the quality is there. The only thing that is lacking is the culture, in a sense that it leans more towards the American scheme instead of an Asian one."

"Traditionally, architecture in Asia is an informal mix of homes. Asian culture is very rich. It's about the wealth and big quality of Asian cities. But there's been a shift in the pattern whereby Asian cities are losing their culture. You see this in China and here as well."

One of the topics that was highlighted during Archidex was responsible building. Duplantier says, "I think it is an important aspect of architecture. In Europe, there is a strong public tradition. People are taxed highly but the government makes sure that there is social housing and public spaces. This is an urban design."

"See, you can't only build for the rich. You have to build for the people too. In the US, there isn't much tradition of public spaces. Singapore is a good example of

a country that provides good amenities for its people. They had to destroy a lot to reconstruct, but in the long run, it works much better."

Duplantier believes politicians play a role in helping to build for the people. "This is how I managed to get the project in Africa up and running. I approached the politicians. Some would do anything for the people, which is good."

Of course, he has experienced situations where he and the people he worked with needed to raise funds for a project themselves.

"We had a project in the Philippines where we were building a typhoon-proof campus. There were no clients to pay us; we had to raise the funds ourselves. We worked with the students there and it was a really good experience for the people involved. It is a good balance."

For now, Duplantier's future plans include opening an office either in Malaysia or Singapore, and he hopes to do so within the next three months. "Being in Southeast Asia will give me a chance to learn from other architects and be in a different environment where we can exchange ideas as well as the common values and projects that we have in mind."

For the young and aspiring architects out there, Duplantier's advice is to "open your eyes and be curious".

"Work a lot, never forget to be innovative and tell through your work the things that you have seen. Understand why some things are the way they are and always anticipate the way the world is changing. You need to change with it."

Most importantly, he says, an architect should always be flexible. "Change is rapid so you cannot be set in your ways." ■

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