



Fast Forward

AUDREY WONG speaks to three architects who weigh in on the future of architecture

THE ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL Architecture, Interior Design & Building Exhibition (ARCHIDEXO), organised by the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) and C.I.S. Network, is a fundamental platform for one of the largest confluences of industry players in the region. Its 15th edition this year was no different.

From June 25 - 28, the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre was home to more than 550 exhibitors from Malaysia, Austria, China, Germany, France, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Spain to showcase their latest products and innovations. Held concurrently was ECO-B 2014 (3rd Malaysia Eco Building & Design Exhibition

2014), a satellite exhibition that showcased green architecture and sustainable designs.

At the heart of the trade exhibitions was the 16th Asian Congress of Architects Conference (ACA) organised by the Architects Regional Council Asia (ARCASIA). The biennial conference brought together its regional members for an intellectual exchange of current architectural ideas centred on the theme of rejuvenation. "We need to explore new approaches to rejuvenate the profession in order to stay relevant and to equip ourselves to face challenging tasks ahead," says architect Tan Pei Ing, the current president of ARCASIA.

A series of related events included the Green Building Forum, the Kuala Lumpur Design Forum and DATUM:KL International Architectural Design Conference with notable speakers from all over the world who offered their individual insight, experiences, and ideas. Tan says, "The assembly of emerging architects from different parts of the world offers a great platform to share different design approaches and ideologies that are truly stimulating and inspirational."

DEFYING CONVENTIONS

"I'm an 'experience' designer," says Colin Seah. "I create experiences using landscape, architecture



and design as a tool." The founder and director of design of Singapore-based Ministry of Design illustrated this ethos during his one-hour session at DATUM.HL, where the first-time speaker shared his thoughts on what rejuvenation means to the architecture industry.

"We can either rejuvenate an existing building or we can rejuvenate our way of thinking and how we approach things. I find the latter to be more powerful," he opines. "People and cultures are evolving every day and architecture plays a role on many levels in rejuvenating the way we deal

with the pressures of urban living."

A multiple-award winning architect trained in the United States, Seah's edgy and envelope-pushing approach is epitomised in the firm's vast portfolio that included exemplary case studies of rejuvenation from an architectural perspective. For instance, The Mark business park for Maxon Group in Beijing features boomerang-shaped office buildings that look like a fingerprint when viewed from above. He explains, "Conventional offices are so generic looking that you can't tell apart one building from another. We wanted to use a single versatile floor plan to configure

enigmatic and differential spaces, which is essentially rejuvenating the conventional way of thinking."

Likewise, the Triple V Gallery in Tianjin features a single-storey building with elevated corners to create a remarkable aesthetic when viewed from ground level. The facade is comprised of weave-like overlapping panels in corten steel to give the impression of rusted metal. Seah notes, "The rationale of the design is to respond to the shape of the site and transform it into an eye-catching building. We followed a hyper-rationalisation method to achieve a hyper-artistic result." This



OPPOSITE PAGE: MACALISTER MANSION, PENANG; THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT COLIN SEAH, TRIPLE V GALLERY, TIANJIN, VANKE YANTAI DEVELOPMENT, CHINA



sales gallery by property developer Vanke will be converted into a tourism and cultural centre in the near future.

Seah identifies bespoke spaces as the next big thing, especially in the hospitality and residential sectors. "People look for authenticity and personalised experiences. We will see a variety of products that are less generic with more diversity. Clients come to us when they want to

differentiate themselves and push boundaries."

A case in point is the Macalister Mansion, a 100-year-old colonial mansion transformed into a boutique hotel in George Town, Penang. "The idea stems from a fantasy, pseudo-historical perspective where we imbue it with a storyline and a narrative." Restored to its former grandeur, the property's entrance is flanked by a giant geometrical bust of Norman Macalister, a former

governor of Penang. Apart from helming the architecture and interior design of the mansion, the firm also curated the artworks by artists from Malaysia and Singapore.

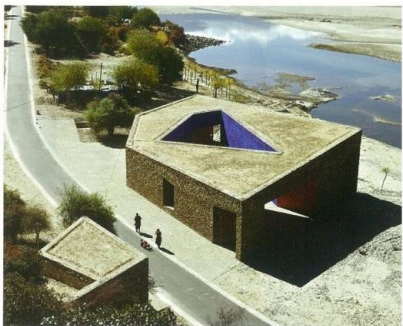
Seah is currently helming two new projects in Penang to repurpose heritage buildings into commercial spaces. He says that rejuvenation needs to be approached in a sensitive manner by first understanding the point of view of a particular country, especially in emerging nations within South-East Asia. "Rejuvenation cannot be undertaken too quickly or comprehensively, otherwise we run the risk of eradicating or erasing any traces of the past. We are only the stewards of the buildings and landscapes. We need to leave something for the next generation to build on."

GREEN HEART

Mike Boon has carved a niche for himself in architecture with his award-winning residential, institutional and conservation projects, particularly in Sarawak. The Deputy Chairman of PAM Sarawak Chapter as well as the founder of Sarawak Heritage Society is known for devoting his time to promote sustainable design and heritage conservation. With 25 years of experience under his belt, the director of Arkitek JFN Sdn Bhd has much to share at the Green Building Forum this year.

He considers green building in Malaysian climate a relatively easy task as architects do not have to worry about extreme temperatures. "Keep the sun out, let the light in and channel





wind for ventilation," said the Sarawakian. "This is nothing new as our forefathers have done it intuitively. However, an increasing number of architects have forgotten these methods."

"My approach is to respond to the basic needs of living comfortably without spending too much on the unnecessary. I advocate the appreciation of what we have naturally. To me, simplicity is truth and truth is beauty."

Green buildings have grown substantially in the last five years thanks to the support of professional bodies such as Green Building Index and Malaysia Green Building Confederation. But Boon believes there is more potential to be tapped. "We are creatures of habit, so it takes time for the green concept to build momentum."

Boon is currently spearheading the restoration project of Fort Alice, a timber fort built in 1864 in Sri Aman, Sarawak. "As an architect, I feel that it is my responsibility to promote awareness of green issues. It may be fashionable now to recycle or have a green label but that does not necessarily mean that the deeper issues are properly understood."

SIMPLICITY IS KEY

Yang Zhao of Dali-based Zhaoyang Architects mused, "Every project tells a story. It is through storytelling that we can relate architecture to other parts of life. Architecture gets rejuvenated

as a result of these relationships."

During his presentation at DATUM:KL, the modernist architect made a strong point about the importance for the industry to reevaluate and shift its focus to the basics. "I always look at the potential of a project in terms of how it can influence lives and what kind of emotion it brings to people. It's not about making new monuments,

iconic structures or fancy shapes. At the end of the day, the core idea is to create a pleasant space for living."

An alumnus of Harvard Graduate School of Design, Yang received international acclaim for the Niyang River Visitor Centre in Tibet and the Home For All in Kesenuma, Japan, which was built for the fishing community affected by the tsunami in 2011. He is of the opinion that sustainability should be viewed from a long-term perspective. "Sustainability means building less."

He provided an example of how urbanisation in China has moved a large number of the rural population to brand new cities. "Is it really necessary to cut off the roots of these farmers by relocating them to a new city? Are these cities feasible for healthy and sustainable living? I do not think so."

According to Yang, the solution is to practise a new form of urbanisation to develop and modernise rural areas. "We should build more small towns instead of large cities. This is the only way we can preserve the landscape while conserving the local cultures."

For this reason, Yang prefers working on small-scale projects that can potentially generate a bigger impact. He admits that it doesn't come without its challenges. "Forging a path without any precedents to learn from is the biggest challenge of all." ■



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TAMAN PANORAMA BENAK, SARAWAK; REBUILDING OF AN OLD SHOPHOUSE, MIKE BOON; THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HOUSE FOR ALL, KESENUMA, JAPAN; NIYANG RIVER VISITOR CENTRE, TIBET; YANG ZHAO