

Seong Aun (left) and Sau Lai say the competition recognises and rewards young Malaysian architectural graduates for design excellence

Early career boost for graduating architects

BY E JACQUI CHAN

Architecture has long played an important role in forming the built environment of cities around the world. This is especially true in a young nation like Malaysia where developments are continuous and rapid.

The architect profession in Malaysia has seen its fair share of challenges over the years, among which are cultivating emerging talent and keeping it in the country as well as helping local architectural firms to remain competitive in an increasingly open market.

Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) or the Malaysian Institute of Architects is tackling these challenges head-on with various initiatives. Chief among them is the introduction of the PAM-Tan Sri Ar Chan Sau Lai Architectural Award (PAM-TSCSL), which began in 2012. Founded by PAM and Chan, this competition is different from PAM's other awards for it is open to final-year students who have just graduated or about to graduate.

Chan was a practising architect himself and sits on PAM Education Fund's board of management and board of trustees. He is also executive chairman of Beneton Properties Sdn Bhd and a council member of the Real Estate and Housing Developers' Association Malaysia.

City & Country recently sat down with him and PAM president Chan Seong Aun to talk about the importance of competitions such as PAM-TSCSL, the need to nurture and retain talent, the challenges ahead and PAM's strategies to grow the profession.

The Edge: What is the objective of PAM-TSCSL and why is it important?

Chan Seong Aun: The primary objective of the competition is to recognise and reward young Malaysian architectural graduates for design excellence. As the competition is open to final-year

students who have just graduated or are about to graduate, it gives the winners a head start over their peers by showcasing their talent when they are about to enter the workforce.

Tan Sri Chan Sau Lai: Most of the universities and colleges have their own awards, but we thought it would be useful to have an award that is judged and given by industry peers. It makes the award more meaningful. PAM honours a lot of architects every year, but they are already practising and successful.

How will the award help local emerging talent and the profession?

Seong Aun: The PAM-TSCSL award, as stated, is 'an inspirational platform that recognises outstanding achievements in design by architectural graduates'. Most young graduates, when they start work, are usually given routine jobs that do not allow them to fully explore their talent. When you join a practice, you don't get to do glamorous projects. You end up doing detailing work for toilets and the likes.

So, the competition gives them excellent opportunity at an early stage in their career to shine and show their talent. It will allow them to design something they are passionate about, unrestricted by things like budget. With this recognition, they can move forward faster as they are given due recognition.

PAM has always supported any effort to promote Malaysian architectural talents and this is one of our major events. The judging of the entries ends in May and the award will be presented in August.

With the competition now in its third year, what was the calibre of the entries in the previous two years?

Sau Lai: Those who want to participate in a competition like this must have confidence that their project is significant enough to merit acknowledgement, so all the projects we have seen in the past years have been impressive.

Seong Aun: The entries have been top-

notch. You can expect designs of this level because it takes a lot of effort to put together a project. At our end, it's a two-stage competition. We shortlist the first 10 projects, then we re-evaluate before deciding on the winner.

Sau Lai: There has also been good variety. We received designs for airports, hotels, malls and exhibitions centres. And last year, we received a lot of green projects. Then, there were the more down-to-earth, bread-and-butter projects that would be relevant to the real world.

Our first-year winner Mak Thur Pei's project was the most low-key of her batch amid the flamboyant and dramatic entries. We kept going back to it because while it was low key and practical, it had a lot of interesting ideas, which we felt merited the award.

I feel that awards conferred by your peers mean more as they are recognised by a very critical team of professional architects. I think architects by nature are very critical people because this is an artistic profession and art is so subjective. What I find impressive may not impress Seong Aun. So, to have a jury pick the best is not easy.

This year, our jury will consist of Chan, two other senior architects and, for the first time, two overseas judges. One is Tan Cheng Siong, a Singapore Institute of Architects gold medallist, and the other is Sathirut Nui Tandand, an award-winning Thai architect who is also the president-elect of the Architects Regional Council of Asia. They are keen to see what Malaysian architects have to offer. This will be a very interesting year.

What are your expectations for this award going forward?

Seong Aun: We are looking at how Southeast Asia develops. Maybe one day, we will open the competition to all graduates in the region. Right now, it is only open to Malaysians and they could be studying in any school around the world and working in any country.

This is another reason a competition like this is important. We want to encourage those who study and work overseas to come back to Malaysia. Many of the young architects tend to stay overseas when they graduate. It is fine for them to work abroad for a few years to gain experience but if you don't have a magnet to bring them back, we end up losing all the best talent. It's important for them to see that we still have a lot of opportunities here.

Sau Lai: I think like all awards, PAM-TSCSL will have its ups and downs. People will get excited and sometimes interest may wane. Longevity is what we are aiming for; most awards want to retain their gloss for the long term. There could be other awards from PAM in the future and I'm really honoured that it has chosen my name for this award.

Don't you think it is good for young architects to be exposed to different styles and cultures by working overseas for a period of time, growing their skills?

Sau Lai: It is good for young architects to work overseas for a while because architecture, like art, needs international influence. Eventually, your perception and philosophy of what architecture is will evolve with experience and different influences. It takes time to nurture and yield results.

When I was still a practising architect, our firm had Thai, American and Japanese architects. I find that the Americans and especially the Thais are very artistic and dramatic in their designs while the Japanese are more elegant and subtle. I think in a way, we all cross-influenced each other.

Seong Aun: If you go to countries like Singapore, you can see 5 to 10 different nationalities working in one architectural firm. Many of them have different talents, skills and perception of what architecture is.

For example, when I was working in Singapore, I sat next to an architect

from Hong Kong. At the time, I was designing projects for Malaysia. He took one look at my plan and said the use of space was very inefficient. Why? Because coming from Hong Kong, he was used to small spaces. I learnt from the way he designed spaces. His design was so efficient in the way it used space. Now, if you were to ask him to design a bungalow in Sarawak, where land is not an issue, he would scratch his head about what to do with all that space. It's a different skill and mindset.

In Malaysia, architects have to adapt to both ends as we have cities with limited land and cities with ample land. As an architect, you have to be very flexible in your thinking. So, we do get influenced by other architects and their work and we learn from one another.

Sau Lai: That is the beauty of being in a design or creative profession. Look at musicians, there are only so many notes you can play on a piano but the compositions are endless. Architects compose solid symphony. We use steel, concrete, tiles and the likes yet the language and final product are so different from one another.

There has been criticism that local architects are being overlooked for jobs, which are going to better-known foreign architects. What are your thoughts on this?

Seong Aun: There have been several significant projects that have been awarded to foreign architects without any Malaysian architect or firm being given the opportunity to participate. I attribute this to the much better marketing skills of the foreign architectural firms that are so business savvy. Malaysian architects tend to be more focused on doing their work professionally and have not acquired the marketing skills of foreign firms.

This is why PAM has always advocated that all major government projects and significant public projects be open to competition and we would be

CONTINUES ON PAGE 15