

# Tay aims to lift architectural profession

BY E JACQUI CHAN

Architect Lillian Tay has achieved a lot in her career that spans more than 25 years. The newly elected deputy president of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) has been, among other things, an author, public speaker, curator and an advocate of the conservation of urban architectural heritage.

As the principal and director of the award-winning Veritas Design Group, Tay and her team have undertaken a good number of prominent projects, including the DiGi headquarters in Shah Alam, 1 Sentral in KL Sentral, Brunei Embassy in Beijing and Souk Al Kabeer in Dubai.

Their Menara Binjai in Kuala Lumpur was awarded Cityscape Dubai Best Sustainable Development (Built) in 2012 and recently, their refurbishment work on Sinkoh Hotel in George Town, Penang, earned the firm PAM's Building of the Year award.

Tay says she knew from a young age that she wanted a career in the creative field. "I was also interested in science and was always in the science stream but I wanted to do something creative as well. However, the parents of my generation did not encourage us to study art or fine arts. So, architecture was the perfect balance. Today, I would have studied fine arts," she laughs.

She recalls being wowed by the design of University Hospital in Petaling Jaya when she was young. "I was quite intrigued by the building and the way it was designed. Until today, it is known as a very good modern building. But at the time, I was just thinking how wonderful it would be to design a building like that."

"Today, I realise architecture is more than just designing buildings. I recognise the role of architecture and architects in the whole process of nation building. I think that is what sets us apart from other businesses."

The Kuala Lumpur-born Tay obtained a Bachelor in Engineering and Master of Architecture degrees at Princeton University in the US. She went on to work for Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates in New York City for three years before returning to KL in 1991.

"My stint in New York was a good experience as I got to see how architecture is practised by top practitioners. Interestingly, I came back because Kohn Pedersen Fox was at the time participating in the competition for Petronas Twin Towers.

"Obviously, we didn't win but I saw the opportunities in Malaysia. KL was then looking towards becoming a global city. That aside, I have always wanted to come back because I feel I can contribute a lot more here. There are more untrodden paths and more opportunities to do something of value and purpose in Malaysia. I've always advised young people to come home because there is so much brain drain here," says Tay.

She notes that based on her experience with Veritas, those who have worked overseas do not necessarily have the same experience as Malaysian architects. "I realised the level of experience of those who have worked overseas is limited because there is a large pool of architects overseas and there is a certain hierarchy. An architect who has worked for three to four years here has the same amount of experience and exposure as someone who has worked in, say, the UK, for 10 years," she remarks.

Tay is also one of the few female architects to hold a council position in PAM and one of the few well-known ones in Malaysia. In fact, in its 90-plus years, PAM has had only one female president — Tan Pei Ing.

"People are always curious about the lack of women in the profession. If you look at the schools today, the ratio of male and female students is 50:50. However, it looks like there is some fallout when they start their working life.



Tay: We have to work on programmes to attract talent and one is to ensure work is given to local architects. That's my view as a practitioner and employer.

"It's quite a challenge for women to juggle the commitments of their job and family obligations, especially in Asia. We don't have flexible work arrangements and perhaps, that is something we should consider to keep more women in the profession. And to hold a position in the council on top of your work and family obligations is even harder," comments Tay.

She says the building industry is male-dominated, which makes it even harder for a woman to grow her business. "These issues are also present in many other countries and continue to be a problem," she adds.

## Meaningful buildings and spaces

Tay say good architecture is not just about spaces. "You have to feel good in that space; you should get views, light and comfort. Aesthetic is subjective and it changes over time. What we thought was beautiful in the 1980s may not be so now. Of course, some buildings over time find new value as retro buildings," she points out.

She derives great satisfaction from seeing the buildings she had worked on gain a strong presence in the urban realm. One such building is the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in Putrajaya. "It was one of the earlier buildings in Putrajaya and was meaningful to us because it felt like we're building a part of a new city. There were some interesting urban opportunities in each building and it was so interesting to see how the city came together," she says.

Another project that has a special place in Tay's heart is telco DiGi.Com Bhd's headquarters in Shah Alam. At the time, DiGi was making a transition from a traditional work culture to a modern one. The design did away with the common compartmentalised workstations to one based completely on a paperless, open space.

"Employees no longer have an assigned desk but work in clusters in a collaborative kind of environment and they can sit anywhere they like. They can work in the lounge the whole day if they want. When you dispossess people of a desk, how then do you make them have a sense of belonging?"

"What we did was to create extra spaces for the employees to go to when they wanted to

depress or work in a quiet environment. There were a lot of open spaces and community areas for the employees to interact. DiGi was committed to the change but the space had to accommodate and facilitate the change," says Tay.

Such an environment, which can be seen in countries like Britain, creates a sense of self-accountability, she adds.

## Upholding the standards

An architect's job involves more than design and it remains a challenge to get people to understand and appreciate their work, comments Tay. But PAM is looking into the matter. "It's not just the flourish of designing a nice building. We are also the ones who have to ensure the buildings are good and safe for occupation. It's tedious work; we don't turn around jobs like doctors. A project takes a minimum of four years from the design phase to when people move in. Some of the large buildings can be an eight-year process," she says.

Hence, Tay stresses, it is important that the Architects (Scale of Minimum Fees) Rules 2010 are strictly observed by both architects and clients. "The scale of minimum fees is there to ensure good standards are upheld in the interest of public health and safety. It's important as global borders are opening and we are under a lot of pressure to open our market and economy."

"However, we can't be a totally open market where the lowest bidder wins and we can't cut short the process of delivering a building. If you have very low fees, it will be very hard for architects and engineers to put in the type of work and care that is needed to get everything right," she opines.

Architects overseas, especially in the developed nations, are often feted for their work yet Malaysian architects have largely remained unrecognised. Tay believes that part of the problem is that local architects are fearful of being accused of self-promotion as it is in the code of ethics and practice that architects are not allowed to solicit work.

"I think that is why we tend to stay out of the limelight. Perhaps, it is partly our fault. However, in view of the global economy, we may have rethink our approach. I think we should

be able to project ourselves and the value of the work we bring to the industry without having the impression of self-promotion.

"The code of conduct and practice needs to be understood in that light. Last time, the authorities even used to regulate the size of our signboards but I think they are opening up slowly. Perhaps not fast enough as we are opening up the industry. We will have people of different cultures coming to work in Malaysia and they may not have the same restrictions. So, we should not be holding back," she observes.

She says one of the problems faced by the profession is getting access to good and high-profile jobs. "Nearly every high-profile building in Malaysia is designed by foreign architects. There's no faith in Malaysians. Maybe 30 years ago, we didn't have local architects with the right capability and experience but now, I would say we have many who are capable of handling large-scale projects. While we do work with government-linked corporations, the most important projects are not even offered to Malaysians to compete."

Developers too prefer foreign architects who they believe bring value to their high-profile projects, adds Tay. "This is to the detriment of our profession here. We architects are not given many opportunities to grow our skills and capacity. We are talking about bringing back talent but then you give the job to foreigners. There's no incentive for Malaysians working abroad to come home then."

However, it is not always about marketing with the developers, some of whom give jobs to foreign architects because they have more bodies to work on projects, says Tay. "We do lack architects in Malaysia. It's a chicken-and-egg situation. We don't have great projects to attract the young architects, so we can't retain the brightest talents who prefer to work overseas on more interesting and exciting projects. We have to work on programmes to attract talent and one is to ensure work is given to local architects. That's my view as a practitioner and employer," opines Tay.

## Building capacity to compete

To address the liberalisation of the industry, PAM set up the Liberalisation and Professional Development committee two years ago.

"We are looking at building capacity so that our architects will be able to compete as the market opens up. The next step is to be able to offer services regionally and maybe even as far as the UK," says Tay.

Competing on a global stage also means a technology upgrade. In this case, there is a need for local architects to buy the latest software — Building Information Modeling (BIM).

"PAM has approached SME Corp Malaysia to try and facilitate some subsidies for local architects to buy BIM. The software is very expensive but it's needed. I think many smaller companies and even the big ones find it a challenge to upgrade quickly because it's costly and it takes time to train people to use it."

"It's more expensive here also because of the conversion rate as the software is priced in US dollars. It's cutting into our competitive edge because we can't equip ourselves with good tools," says Tay.

At present, PAM doesn't know the number of practices using BIM. It is this lack of statistics that prompted it to set up a new committee — Media, Research and Public Relations — headed by Tay.

"The committee is trying to do more research to compile data on the industry to help the local architects compete better here and abroad. We have just started but the reality is that the floodgates have been opened. And we have to take very rapid steps to improve our shortcomings," asserts Tay.

While the profession has its problems, she believes that with persistence, determination and team work, Malaysian architects can compete at the international level. ■