

# We cannot think provincial anymore, says Esa

BY CHAI YEE HOONG

n the buzzing Kuala Lumpur city centre one late afternoon, architect and planner Tan Sri Esa Mohamed talks to *City & Country* about his experience in the design industry as well as his views on the current market and the need for architects to go global.

The founder and managing director of Akitok Jururancang (M) Sdn Bhd, Esa was recently elected president of the International Union of Architects (UIA) for the 2014/15 term — the first from Asia to be elected president.

Some of the notable projects he was involved in are the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Sungai Buloh Hospital/Trauma Centre & College of Allied Health Sciences, Datarul Baiti Resort Langkawi, Mid Valley Megamall and The Gardens Mall.

Esa has also collaborated with various international firms from the UK, Europe, Japan and Australia, and has done projects in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, China, Tatarstan and Indonesia. The projects he is currently involved in include the Pagoh Education Hub and Tun Razak Exchange.

In his early years, Esa developed an interest in art and painted murals in school. At the same time, he was a science student who excelled in mathematics and mechanics. "Art became a hobby and my perception was like Leonardo da Vinci's, that art and science would combine as a profession. Hence, architecture was the natural choice."

His academic success in university led to him becoming the first Asian student to win the Gold Medal award at the University of Newcastle in Australia.

Reminiscing on his early years as an architect, the immaculately dressed Esa says his first project was planning the development for the Sabang Jaya township under Goh Hock Guan & Associates, where he got the "sink or swim treatment".

"That was when I first came back [to the country]. The project was probably the biggest integrated township at the time and, being outside Kuala Lumpur, no one wanted to go there. I was in charge of preparing the overall master plan, which covered around 1,440 acres at the time and a population of about 75,000. That was my first project and I enjoyed doing it," he says.

"In those days, we did not have computers. Everything was done manually, where you draw on tracing paper, so great diligence was required."

As an adjunct professor at the National Islamic University in Malaysia in 2004, he had encouraged the



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university lecturers to disallow the use of computers for the students in their first few years of university.

"They should learn to use their hands and eyes as this was how we were trained. Emulating Leonardo da Vinci — as designers, we have to feel what we draw," says Esa.

A past president of Pertubuhan Akitok Malaysia (PAM) from 1993 to 1995, he now sits on the PAM council and is also a member of the Kuala Lumpur City Hall advisory board. Esa believes the architecture industry in Malaysia has "developed remarkably well since I returned to the country 40 years ago and our developments are on par with those developed in other countries. Our professionals are well exposed to the latest technology".

However, he notes that market aspiration is changing, driven by technological advancements. He believes the technology today allows for the internalisation of the industry.

Currently the co-chairman of the National Professional Services Export Council under the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (Matriade) and chairman of the monitoring committees of APEC and ASEAN Architects, Esa is a proponent of liberalisation. He believes "the world is the market, and we cannot think provincial anymore".

## Building designs here are 'world class'

FROM PAGE 10

He opines that with the current technology, environmental and social changes, architects have to expand their expertise and knowledge to deal with every aspect of the environment, ranging from community resilience to high-impact economic developments.

"In the past, architects designed for their clients and supervised the contractor. That principal role has not changed except that knowledge and procurement processes have changed. In the midst of all these processes, [the architects] must be able to adapt [to] these changes, otherwise they will not do justice to the profession." However, he says the building designs and city planning here are "world class." "We have embarked on Green Building Index (GBI) designs and technologies with our own green rating tools. Soon, GBI will celebrate 100 million sq ft of GBI-rated space in the country. These are remarkable achievements for a young nation." But he believes the architecture industry has not been given the recognition it deserves.

"We have not gone to the level of the Japanese who actually take design as a culture from the onset — from the time they are children. It is important to inculcate the design culture in schools, and how it makes them very meticulous."

He says having such a design-oriented culture and upbringing affects the way one views and cares for their environment. "That is why it is very important to inculcate the design culture in schools, and the UIA is organising events such as the World Architecture Day; Healthy Cities, Happy Cities in October."

Esa believes more should be done to increase the level of awareness of the design and architecture culture by organising programmes such as architecture festivals that engage the community at large.

He says, just like how people do not know much about architects, they did not know much about UIA previously too. "When it was first announced that I was elected as the president of UIA, people congratulated me for being the president of Universiti Islam

Antarabangsa (International Islamic University), he laughs.

UIA is a non-governmental organisation established in 1948 and represents over 1.3 million architects in 124 countries worldwide. It "aims to share progressive ideas in architecture, planning and the built environment for the benefit of the communities of the world."

"UIA can be consulted for advice on local issues that affect the practice or built environment and it is influential enough to advise governments on standards and advancements in technologies that affect the built environment," says Esa.

According to him, the union develops best practices for the profession that are tailored to the conditions of each region and country of the member sections, which can be used as a guide for education, training and practice for architects, and can also be a conduit for universities to network and share knowledge across borders and for students of various countries to connect with one another, facilitating the free flow of infor-

mation to bring about new ideas and innovations.

Esa says some of the humanitarian initiatives that UIA has carried out include providing aid to countries that had encountered disasters, such as the Haiti earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

"We have to develop new ideas and designs to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, which affect people and their habitats. We have to accept that climate change is affecting our environment and this change is the result of our rapid urbanisation."

During the UIA World Congress in Durban this year, the organisation unanimously adopted the 2050 imperative that aims to eliminate carbon dioxide emissions in the built environment by 2050.

"UIA acts as a facilitator, so that we can oversee projects and activities in a holistic manner, and so that we can share. As the president of this union, I wish [for people] to subscribe to our objectives and be aware that [as] architects [we] are responsible for creating a built environment

"You cannot close your doors as there are big boys out there that can pry open your doors, and you have to be ready for the fight. You cannot be protective forever."

Using Singapore as an example, he says the country had faced the same challenge 30 years ago, with stiff competition from foreign firms. "Although the consultants and architects were frustrated with the government's decision to liberalise, they ventured abroad and here we have a total of 1,800 architects and have become internationally competitive."

He opines that this evolution is due to globalisation and liberalisation, and he believes this is currently the biggest challenge in the local industry.

"It is not that we don't have the expertise in Malaysia but it is fragmented. AECOM has about 75,000 staff, and here we have a total of 1,800 architects and 16,000 registered engineers. So, how do we compete with these mammoth offshore organisations?"

According to Esa, Malaysia's historic buildings, which are now heritage buildings, were designed by colonial architects and builders. He says the era of globalisation is happening again as the country is a part of the world trade community, and it needs foreign investment to stimulate and sustain its economic growth.

"A global network such as UIA facilitates the mobility of architects; they can work outside their country as that would bring mutual benefits to the local professionals. The local architects must accept the need to network, increase capacity and form partnerships, in order to be competitive," he says.

Apart from liberalisation, he advocates the use of building information modelling (BIM), which has been adopted in Europe, the UK and Singapore, among others. He notes that the adoption of BIM in Malaysia is slow for the time being and attributes this to the country not having enough trained personnel. It is also expensive to migrate from the current AutoCAD software to BIM, and "at the end of the day, it is the mindset — whether you're willing to accept the migration. If you want to be competitive worldwide, you have to do it. So we've got frustrated when they engage someone offshore because they have the capabilities. We have [develop that capability]," he says.

"As architects, one of our challenges is to achieve a zero-defect outcome. To achieve this, the industry must invest in the latest BIM software and expertise as this is now the world standard."

CONTINUES ON PAGE 12

that is sustainable and conducive to healthy living in order to [create] a better world.

"I would also like the world to know that UIA is the perfect vehicle as it can harness resources and knowledge from the [international] membership. UIA is a social contract [which binds] the architects, the community and the environment," says Esa.

Some notable awards Esa has received for his works are the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2001 for the Datarul Baiti Resort Langkawi and the PAM Gold Award 2006 for the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre for Innovation, Effective & Practical Application for Architecture.

He believes that for Malaysia to be a developed nation by 2020, it has to be exposed to the international market. "We have to think internationally. I like to see architects worldwide moving [to other countries] to work. It will enrich the cross-cultural engagement and sharing of technologies to provide a new meaning to architecture." ■