

New PAM president is a man with a mission

BY E JACQUI CHAN

Mohd Zulhemlee An has always had an interest in arts and science. As the newly elected president of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) notes, architecture happens to be the perfect blend of both.

"That's why architecture is the right choice for me. In architecture, you have to apply both. Even things like the organisation of space is, in a way, science," Zulhemlee tells *City & Country*.

The idea of pursuing architecture as a career came to him during a visit to a housing exhibition when he was in Form Five.

"I knew I wanted to do something creative for a living but at the time, I had not decided on my choice of career. Then one day, I went to a housing exhibition in BB Plaza in Bukit Bintang. I remember looking at the scale models and layouts, and thinking how could anyone afford to buy the houses at RM70,000," says Zulhemlee, who is also a partner in W&W Architects.

Though the price tag of RM70,000 is considered very low these days, it was expensive at the time. Even more so for a "kampung boy" like Zulhemlee.

"I come from Sabak Bernam, a small border town between Perak and Selangor. So, to me, RM70,000 was very expensive. I thought if I can design houses that are more affordable for people, it would be my way of contributing to society. That idea planted the seed of becoming an architect," he says.

After spending his secondary school years in a boarding school — Sekolah Menengah Sains Selangor — in Kuala Lumpur, Zulhemlee was given the opportunity to study architecture in the University of Arkansas in the US in 1983.

"I was a government scholar and at the time, the government was looking for new places to send students for studies because traditional destinations such as Australia and the UK were becoming too costly. So, the US was the testing ground, so to speak. If I remember correctly, I was in the second group of students that was sent to study in the US."

Upon graduation in 1988, Zulhemlee worked in a small architecture firm in Arkansas for a year. "At the time, the economy back home wasn't good. I wanted to stay longer in Arkansas but my parents wanted me to come back. I had younger siblings at home and I had to assist them in some ways."

Even though coming back to Malaysia so soon after graduation wasn't what he had planned, Zulhemlee believes it was the right decision in the end. "I came back in 1990 and we were just coming out of the recession. I didn't have to wait long to secure a job."

He joined Arkitek Kitas Sdn Bhd that same year and had the opportunity to be involved in the design of several educational, religious and medical buildings in Minnesota, the US, through a collaboration with US-based BWBR Architects.

In 2003, after a short-term project-based stint in W&W Architects, he was offered a partnership in the firm. Zulhemlee also has a sole proprietorship, Arkitek Zulhemlee An.

As the team leader for all projects in W&W Architects, Zulhemlee is responsible for their overall design and implementation.

Although Zulhemlee has completed a number of big projects, it is the smaller projects that he is proudest of.

"For bigger projects such as the ones in Putrajaya, I contributed but was not the designer. I have designed a few colleges, which gave me the satisfaction of coming up with the concept, design and everything else, all the way to completion," he says.

One of his favourite projects was the renovation and addition to Kolej Kediaman Ibnu Sina in Universiti Malaya (UM) in Kuala Lumpur during his time with Arkitek Kitas.

"The student numbers were growing very fast, so UM needed more space. What I liked about the project was that I was able to express my thinking in the design.

"I like openness. We are a tropical country, so openness is important to let the air circulate naturally. That was what I managed to do with the hostel.



KENNY YAP/THE EDGE

“Architecture is a demanding profession and yet, it is one of the least respected, considering the responsibility and contribution to society” — Zulhemlee

I also created a courtyard, which is one of my signatures,” says Zulhemlee.

One of the most important things in design for him is to look for clues in the surrounding areas. “The surrounding areas, culture, climate and such will all influence my design. I always think about functionality and practicality, then I come up with the basic layout and general form of the structure. From there, I will look at areas that can enhance the building. For example, you can open up the balcony or create atriums to improve the form.”

Among his projects are a 15-storey office building for Kementerian Perusahaan Utama and the Immigration Department in Precinct 2, Putrajaya, and a 17-storey building for Kementerian, Belia dan Sukan and Jabatan Penerbangan Awam Malaysia in Precinct 4, Putrajaya, as well as Kolej Islam Darul Ridzuan in Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

A demanding profession

Zulhemlee hopes to tackle a few issues during his term as PAM president. “I have a few agendas. One is to make sure architects are paid according to the scale of fees and paid on time. Second is to increase the number of architects in the country, and lastly, promote architecture to the public.

“Many people do not realise the amount of work and thought that goes into designing a building. Architecture is a demanding profession and yet, it is one of the least respected, considering the responsibility and contribution to society. People, including clients, don't see the value we bring.”

Zulhemlee recalls meeting students from a private secondary school at a career talk recently. “I asked the students how many of them wanted to be architects and only one raised his hand. I think this is reflective of many young people's impression of the profession — too much hard work and not enough pay.

“The fees paid do not commensurate with the

work done. I believe with the right compensation, the quality of architecture and services will improve. We will be able to get the right people to be involved in projects and more students to take up architecture studies.”

While there is already a set scale of minimum fees under the Architects (Scale of Minimum Fees) Rules 2010, there are architects willing to take jobs at lower fees because of the competitive market.

“Usually, when you work for less payment, the quality will suffer. To me, the value system in architecture needs to be readjusted — you can't just look at the profits. There is intangible value like the value of design, which can give you a better building that is worth more than a regular building. Developers should look at architects and other consultants involved in a project as partners rather than just consultants,” says Zulhemlee.

He stresses that people have to understand that the scale of minimum fees is there to protect the public.

“Under the rules, the basic services are outlined. So when you engage an architect, you know what to expect and the fees attached to these services are the minimum an architect should be charging.

“For architects to deliver good quality work, we need to be adequately compensated. The right payment will allow us to spend more time on a project with the right people. If not, the architect will be scrambling to look for other jobs to compensate for the one he or she accepted at a lower fee.”

Enforcement falls under the Board of Architects Malaysia (BAM), which is the regulatory body for the profession.

“I understand that BAM may not have the manpower to enforce this rule but it also depends on reports. If reports are not made, BAM can't take action. BAM needs cooperation from all parties, including the public,” comments Zulhemlee.

He acknowledges that getting cooperation from all parties will be tough, but it is something that needs to be done.

“For starters, architects should be united for the benefit of the profession. I understand that many architects are tempted to take on projects at lower fees because they have to sustain the business. We have been talking about this for years and so far, we have not made good progress, but we shouldn't give up because what we do affects the public.”

Another worrying issue is the number of registered architects, which Zulhemlee puts at about 2,000.

“We need to double our numbers by 2020. To be a developed nation, we need a ratio of one architect to about 4,000 to 8,000 people. Currently, we are at one architect to 16,000.

“The problem is partly that we don't have enough places in our universities for architecture studies. Then there is also the low passing rate for the Part III Professional Examination, which is around 10% to 20% each year. However, last year, the passing rate was only 6%,” Zulhemlee points out.

The exam is the final step one has to take to become a professional architect.

Zulhemlee feels that candidates are not necessarily to be blamed for the low passing rate.

“It's a matter of preparation. A graduate architect in Malaysia with two to three years' experience often has to handle two to three projects at a time. In the US, one project is handled by three to five architects. So where can they find the time to prepare for the exam?”

He also questions the type of training some architectural firms are providing graduate architects.

“We have a certain framework in place and we know the kind of experience they need to pass Part III, but not everybody gets that experience. PAM is doing its part by conducting preparatory courses for graduate architects to prepare for the exam. Even then, we need to do more.”

Recognising local talents

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing number of local companies hiring foreign architects to design their buildings. Zulhemlee says this trend has deprived local architects of the opportunity to take on high-profile projects and to build their skill set.

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A fair playing ground

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"In an era of star architects, some clients feel that by having one design their buildings, they can charge a premium for their properties. They would publicise the hiring as a form of marketing, but not if the architect is local. It is 'the Gucci syndrome' – a term coined years ago by renowned Malaysian architect Datuk Ken Yeang. Even though we have a large pool of talent, we do not receive that kind of treatment. We are not asking to be celebrated but to be given proper recognition

and a fair playing ground.

"When you hire big name architects, you have to pay them premium fees as well. With that kind of fees, I'm sure our local architects can perform just as well. We have neglected to recognise our own architects who have contributed to the development of our cities. Many buildings designed by our architects have served their purpose well but often, clients don't even mention who they are," he remarks.

"Why aren't local architects given the chance to do overseas projects by

local developers, and allowed to show their talents? Let them be involved in projects that have our national interest."

Zulhemlee believes part of the problem lies with the architects themselves as Asians in general have a more modest approach to marketing themselves. "I think we don't publicise ourselves enough. That mindset has to change."

In an effort to address this issue, PAM has been holding architecture competitions and embarking on trade missions overseas with

government agencies.

"We believe in equal access to jobs. We organise competitions so people will come up with new ideas and we will be able to showcase those ideas. The trade missions are a way to promote our architects overseas.

"We have expertise we can share – our architects are great at designing townships and mass housing. Some are great in conservation, green buildings and tropical architecture. Why not showcase this expertise overseas?"

Zulhemlee is also considering do-

ing a documentary on Malaysian architecture and architects to educate the public.

He stresses that architecture is an honest, honourable profession, and there is a need for architects to be more open with the public.

"We are not here to blow our own trumpet but to share with the public that architecture is an integral part of our society. We are losing our position in the industry. That's why we need to raise our profile and bring us back to that leadership position," Zulhemlee concludes. ■