

# Why Malaysian architecture doesn't have to suffer from the Gucci syndrome

By E Jacqui Chan / [theedgeproperty.com](http://theedgeproperty.com) | July 30, 2015 4:13 PM MYT



**Meet Mohd Zulhemlee An. He's the new president of the Malaysian Institute of Architects, better known as PAM, and here are his plans.**

**A bit about the man from Sabak Bernam, the border town in Selangor : He decided to become an architect after visiting a housing exhibition when he was in Form Five because he wanted to design affordable homes.**

“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.”

RM70,000 is considered a downpayment these days, but it was expensive at the time, 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.”

**After attending Sekolah Menengah Sains Selangor, a boarding school in Kuala Lumpur, he did architecture at the University of Arkansas in the US in 1983. After graduating in 1988, he worked in a small practice in Arkansas for a year.**

“I was a government scholar, and 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.”

“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.

“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. If Minnesota looks vaguely familiar to you, it might be because Zulhemlee had a hand in several of its educational, religious and medical buildings. Arkitek Kitas worked with US-based BWBR Architects on them.

**He’s proudest of his smaller projects. A personal favourite is his work on Kolej Kediaman Ibnu Sina in Universiti Malaya (UM) in Kuala Lumpur for Arkitek Kitas.**

“Student numbers were growing very fast, so UM needed more space. 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. I also created a courtyard, which is one of my signatures.”

Among his other 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, and Kolej Islam Darul Ridzuan in Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

**And the man with a plan would like to...**

“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 is one of the least respected, considering its responsibility and contribution to society. People, including clients, don’t see the value we bring.”

**He met with students from a private secondary school at a career talk recently and asked them how many wanted to be architects and...**

“...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 do not commensurate with the work done. 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, some architects are willing to accept lower fees because of the competitive market.

“Usually, when you work for less payment, quality will suffer. The value system in architecture needs to be readjusted - you can't just look at profits. There is intangible value in design, which can give you a better building worth more than a regular one. Developers should look at architects and other consultants as partners rather than just consultants.”

**He says the scale of minimum fees is there to protect the public.**

“Under the rules, the basic services are outlined so that when you engage an architect, you know the fees [for] these services are the minimum an architect should be charging.

“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.

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



**He's pretty worried about the low number of registered architects: "about 2,000 professionals". That's around one architect per 16,000 Malaysians.**

"To be a developed nation, we need a ratio of one architect to about 4,000 to 8,000 people. 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%.

"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?"

"We have a certain framework in place [to impart the] experience they need to pass Part III, but not everybody gets that experience. PAM does its part by conducting preparatory courses for graduate architects. We need to do more."

**The problem with the era of global star architects for Malaysian architecture is that...**

"...some clients feel that by having one design their buildings, they can charge a premium for their properties. They 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.

“Why aren’t local architects given the chance to do overseas projects by local developers, and show their talent? Let them be involved in projects that have our national interest.”

**What is to be done? He believes Asians are generally too modest about their good works.**

“I think we don’t publicise ourselves enough. That mindset has to change.

“We believe in equal access to jobs. We organise competitions so people will come up with new ideas and we can showcase those ideas. 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 at conservation, green buildings and tropical architecture. Why not showcase this expertise overseas?”

“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. We need to raise our profile and bring us back to that leadership position.”