

*Reprinted due to wrong project photographs used in Vol. 17 No 5 issue.
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Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM), one of the oldest registered professional bodies in Malaysia, was first established as the Institute of Architects Malaya (IAM) in 1920. In the intervening years, the institute has undergone one other name change, i.e. to the Federation of Malaya Society of Architects (FMSA) in 1948. Under its present Constitution, it was registered as PAM on 20 January 1967.

Amongst others, the objects of PAM are to promote the study and practice of architecture. On the other hand, is the vocation a viable enough proposition, financially, to attract young Malaysians? What are the prospects, medium to long-term, for graduate architects intending to practice in Malaysia?

On these issues as well as on the well-being of the PAM membership, B & I recently caught up with PAM President 2007-2008, Ar. Lee Chor Wah, CEO of S N Low Associates, for his views.



B & I: Could you please tell us a bit more about recent initiatives or developments at Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM)?

Ar. Lee (LCW): We have a few initiatives this year; in particular, we started a company called the Architect Centre Sdn Bhd, a joint venture with Archicentre, a subsidiary of the Royal Australia Institution of Architects, to be launched in May 2008. It will provide building inspection services to house owners as we understand there is a need for an independent opinion on the quality of a house before purchase. That is the first objective and the second is to create more job opportunities for PAM members. In Australia, this initiative has proven to be very successful; what happens is, when a home buyer buys a house, he gets an inspection service done for a nominal sum from the Architect Centre. An architect will then inspect and furnish a report to the potential home buyer. A connection is thus established between the architect and the buyer. Subsequently if the buyer acquires the house and wants renovation or modification done, hopefully he will hire the same architect to do it, outside of the Centre's scope.

Another thing we are continuing to do is, of course, hold our annual exhibition/conference event-PAM Convention/Archidex when we will have speakers from the UK and Japan, among others – that is scheduled for July 2008 and, to date, our booths are almost all fully booked.

B & I: Would this inspection service be over and above the normal valuation exercise?

LCW: Yes, because often valuers do not look at the architectural elements when they do valuation. Even when undertaken by architects, it is still a visual inspection, to check whether there is rising damp or any visual finishing and structural defects. Repairs, if any required, would be recommended to the homeowner.

Architect Centre Sdn Bhd will be operating nationwide but, initially, we will be starting from KL as we need to first provide training to the inspectors. However, there are conditions; to qualify for training, you must (1) be a registered architect, (2) be a PAM member and (3) go through the training process. If desired, we will train others as well but that is the second stage. Experienced experts from Australia will come over and train us.

B & I: Are there architects who are not PAM members and who may desire training as inspectors?

LCW: Yes there are, because membership is not compulsory. Nevertheless, we would train non-members as well, even those who do not aspire to make a business or a livelihood out of it. Hopefully, they will be sharper in the inspection of their own project(s), in quality control, for example, during work-in-progress stage.

As you can see, besides benefiting the public, this inspection exercise also serve to build up PAM's strength, our knowledge base and our skills. We hope that the public will subscribe to it – it will be about pricing, at the end of the day, and we will try to make it as affordable as possible! For now, we will confine this inspection service to residences only and, in time, extend it to cover commercial properties as well, i.e., for due diligence purpose and so on.

Yet another initiative is the launch of an exhibition in One Utama, in association with the Finnish embassy, where we featured the works of well-known Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. It is aimed at bringing architecture to the people because, many a time, our work is neither understood nor appreciated despite architecture being around in Malaysia for more than 50 years. By staging exhibitions in shopping centres where thousands can visit, our intention is to educate the public so that they may appreciate good architecture and design, that what we finally put on paper is our accumulated years of experience and training.

B & I: **How many architects are currently registered as PAM members?**

LCW: We have about 1607 corporate members, meaning Part 3 registered architects but this number is still not enough. Non-corporate membership covers graduates, associate graduates, students, academics and honorary. For the record, during immediate past president Dr. Tan's time, we actually raised the number of

student members, so this year, we hope to continue our student membership drive for more to join us.

B & I: **What is PAM doing to improve the quality/skills of local architects? How would you compare locally-trained architects to those who studied abroad? How different (or not) is the standard of training? What can be done to improve the variance, if necessary?**

LCW: One of the many things we do to upgrade the skills of our architects is the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) which is a mandatory requirement by the Board of Architects. Each year, whilst in practice, architects are required to earn 10 credit points of CPD in order to renew their licences, so this may be regarded as post-graduate qualifications. Further, we organise seminars every alternate week at the PAM Centre on various subjects, be it contracts, acoustics, metal cladding, insulation or paints. This is because we believe that architects must keep pace with the fast-changing environment they work in or be left behind. We even teach our members about chairing meetings, minutes-taking, contract administration, finance and succession planning – a wide variety of courses, you might say. We have committees on International Affairs and Export of Services as well, where we continually encourage our architects to go offshore and explore opportunities for exporting their expertise. We hold regular meetings with our neighbours like Singapore, again to see how they do things there and how we can learn from them.

On locally trained architects, I believe that they are generally quite well trained but the only thing lacking is exposure. Employers are more inclined towards overseas-trained architects as they tend to have more leadership qualities and are better able to handle situations. When you are out there studying or working in a foreign land, you have to do everything on your own, which helps in leadership development! Here, our students find themselves in a more sheltered environment and, in terms of exposure; they do not get to see too many good buildings in Malaysia,

Suffice to say, overseas-trained architects generally have a better command of English than locally-trained ones except, possibly, for UIA students where everything is taught in English. Language aside, it is has something to do with the lecturers themselves who are a little more conservative and students become inhibited and are not encouraged to explore and create more innovative schemes.



Wall Street Center Office Towers, HCMC Vietnam

B & I: Do you think this profession lacks creativity in Malaysia? Are local architects today merely following orders from their clients or are they coming up with their own design concepts? What, in your opinion are the qualities and skills needed that differentiate between a good architect from an excellent architect?

LCW: There are the business-minded architects who will do, sometimes out of economic expediency, whatever the client wants, which is basic architecture. Then there are the visionary architects who continually come up with new design concepts. I believe that, as architects, one of our duties and responsibilities is to educate the client to accept new trends in designs and new thinking, failing which we will not raise their appreciation of our work. Sometimes, when designing something new, we even take the client with us on study tours, to look at specific overseas projects. Sometimes, being better-travelled and knowledgeable, it is the clients that bring us along - besides, they have the resources!

From the Institute's point of view, what we need is numbers, more architects to come into the profession, about 10,000 in the future to serve the country. Ideally, the ratio of architects to citizens should be 1 : 1,000. I believe that once we have the numbers then we will have the desired variety in design work.

B & I: Do you think this profession still attracts the young/future generations? If so, why? And if not, why?

LCW: One of our initiatives is to actually attract more young people to join architecture although it is generally true that, financially, it is not as rewarding as compared to other professions. Indicative salary for fresh graduate architects today is RM 2,500 – 3,000 whereas we understand the proposed revision for medical doctors, after internship, is RM 6,000. Nevertheless, I think we are still attracting people who are passionate about architecture, who like to draw, to be creative. One aspect, though, that is not so attractive is the length of the course of study; it is a 5-year haul as compared to engineering 4 years, economics 3 and most others 3. So for parents, the initial investment is high. That is the first hurdle. Then, when they graduate and work for the Government, they will not be paid a salary that reflects the 5-years training, rather their remuneration would be equivalent to that of any 3-year Bachelor's degree.

Now, there is a worldwide change in the US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand to amend the curriculum to an initial 3-year course in Bachelor of Architectural Science, or something to that effect, and thereafter a Masters programme in the next 2 years. That, I think, is a good initiative so that when they come back and join the Government, they are actually at par with those who have taken 5-year courses and not be paid a Bachelor's degree salary scale.

Anyway, we are not happy with the course content of some foreign universities that offer, for example, first 3 years of liberal arts training when you can do anything – music, painting - to get a Bachelor's degree and then you do a Masters in architecture proper in the next 2 years. We feel that it has got to be architecture from Day One otherwise it is too general, which is one of the reasons why US degrees are not readily recognised. If they do not aspire to be professional architects, then it is OK, as they can still contribute to the industry and be creative in other areas but to register them as architects? Here we need to be more vigilant and exercise control.

B & I: What are the challenges of the architecture profession in Malaysia?

LCW: Our young architects should organise themselves to go on study tours as PAM Chapters have done to Beijing and Singapore. Most of the great architects in history travelled to study different buildings, to be exposed to different cultures and ideas. Travel and exposure, these



are important and so is attending overseas conferences which ARCASIA organises each year in different countries. These are opportunities for exchange of ideas, broadening horizons, interaction with contemporaries and for learning. Last year was in Sri Lanka, this year it will be in Korea. These conferences with architecture tours are relatively inexpensive because they are within Asia and we try to make the cost as low as we possibly can.

B & I: Are there any interesting developments or challenging issues for architects as a result of the recent budget (Budget 2008)?

LCW: It is encouraging to hear that in the 9th Malaysia Plan, many projects have been mooted and proposed, in the different industrial corridors, i.e., North and South, the Iskandar Development Region. All these are good initiatives that give the architectural profession and building industry confidence although I hear that in Penang, some people are not happy with the projects. However, we must look at it objectively - people are not against development per se, it is over-development that they are against. If the development is sensitive, sustainable, within guidelines and not awarded only to the privileged few, then I think everybody is for it.

B & I: More and more architects are venturing abroad looking at overseas projects, does that suggest that there is not enough work at home? What and where are the opportunities in the region or abroad?

LCW: That is just prudent business strategy. From experience we know that the construction industry always comes in cycles, up and down, so by venturing overseas

we hope to smoothen out these cyclical movements in the industry. Although we still have a lot of work here, we (S N Low Associates) ourselves are venturing overseas as we cannot risk putting all our eggs in one basket. We have got to brace ourselves against anything untoward happening in Malaysia.

B & I: Aside from that, are there opportunities abroad?

LCW: Yes, there are, plenty! People in China, India and Vietnam like us and our work. Malaysians are well-liked overseas because we are easy-going, speak good English and when we do business, we are more flexible unlike the 'kwai loh' – with them, when you sign, you pay! PAM has organised a trip to Sharjah in January 2007 and is organising another to Vietnam in April 2008. We have been invited by Oman and we will be going there too.

B & I: What are the key initiatives which PAM has implemented to ensure the continued progress and welfare of its members?

LCW: One thing I am initiating is a few book projects, publishing books on Sabah and Sarawak architecture, for example, so that we have a history on the subject and, at the same time, promote the architecture of our homeland. In fact, we wanted to do one on Penang but there were no takers. For posterity, we are producing a volume on the achievements of our past Gold Medalists and a book on PAM's history is also in the pipeline.

The move to re-brand PAM is in abeyance as there are mixed feelings over this as some reckon that PAM is already a good brand but I feel it's time to do so in order to make ourselves more relevant to society. For my part, I would want to have more interaction with the Press to promote PAM and all its activities.

As for members' welfare, aside from the CPD programmes, we have recently revised the PAM contract, making it easier for our members to implement and administer. Added to these measures, we maintain close contact with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government on matters concerning the Certificate of Completion and Compliance (CCC) and have meetings with REHDA, the Malaysian Institute of Planners, House Buyers Association, etc, to iron out thorny issues affecting the industry.

These are things we do at different levels, Ministry and local Government, and amongst Institutes. PAM is a big





Proposed Office Tower, Jalan Inai, Kuala Lumpur

machinery with a large agenda of things to do, for which we must be grateful to past elders who have set up a good network and infrastructure to serve our members. Not to blow our trumpet but we are looked upon by other professions as being one of the better-run institutes. Our magazines come out regularly and our functions are well organized - much to the credit of all our predecessors, pool of ever eager volunteers and supportive secretariat staff.

B & I: **Looking ahead, what are the latest trends and development in the architectural industry in Malaysia?**

LCW: Looking ahead, I believe that clients today have become more sophisticated and mature – they want international products and good designs, better and faster service but unfortunately these are not commensurate with the fees that they are willing to pay. To our mind, the architect's fee is small in comparison to the overall cost of the project, e.g., the normal rate (PAM's Scale) for, say, a bungalow should ideally be 10% or RM 200,000 for a RM 2.0 million structure but clients are reluctant to pay that. They cannot understand the amount of work we do, to come up with a concept, to go through many rounds of discussions with the client and/or contractor where every single detail has to be taken care of, e.g., the kitchen, the wiring, the plumbing, even the door handle!

I think the future is very bright for architecture in Malaysia and our hope is that the Government will open up their projects for participation by the private sector. It is not good for the profession when the Government awards jobs to selected parties without fair competition - for a start, people who so easily secure these jobs become compla-

cent. Fair and open competition will give our young architects the chance to participate and show their true creativity. Sydney Opera House, for example, was built because it was open to international competition - you do not get great ideas if you keep handing out jobs to someone who is sure of getting it. There is no drive, no incentive put in to create something new. PAM is always willing to help organise such competitions and ensure that they are properly run, as we have done in the past for developers, inviting local as well as international participation.

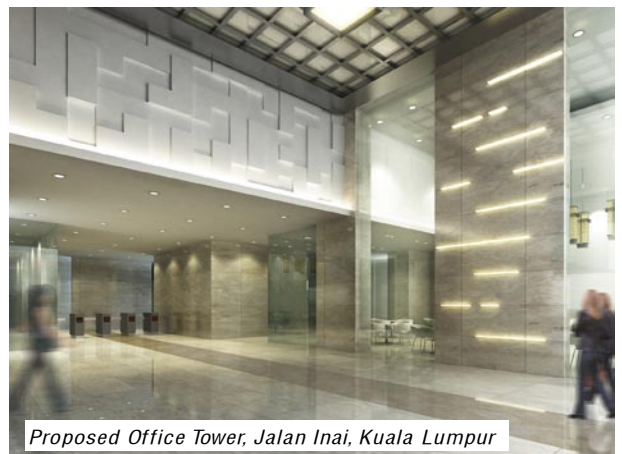
B & I: **Any other observations or comments which you would like to share with B & I readers?**

LCW: In getting the public to appreciate architects, it is hoped that journals and the media like you, when publishing on a project could encourage the developer to give recognition in print to the architect. Similarly, if it is a featured article or an advertisement to promote a project, the architect concerned should be duly identified.

B&I

An honours graduate of the University of New South Wales, Australia, Ar. Lee Chor Wah, 48, first began practising his craft in Sydney in the early years after graduation. On his return from down under, he served in various capacities as Senior Architect, Project Director, Country Manager and Chief Designer with a host of organisations including GDP Architects Sdn Bhd, TAK Design Consultants Sdn Bhd and later, Reng Design Group, prior to his current appointment as Director/Chief Executive Officer of SN Low & Associates Sdn Bhd.

Ar. Lee Chor Wah's cumulative experience in the field is extensive, and ranges from residential dwellings and resorts to corporate offices and high-rise buildings, including overseas projects in Pakistan and the Vietnam. Besides being registered with the Board of Architects Australia and Lembaga Akitek Malaysia, he holds membership in IPDM, RAIA and RIBA and currently serves as President of PAM for 2007-2008.



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