



Ar. Sze To Kok Yin

Architect turned master builder, Ar. Sze To Kok Yin, 72, is a veteran professional and practicing architect of 20 years. A contemporary of the late Datuk Kington Loo, the septuagenarian has served in the past as President of PAM in the mid-70's and currently as Chairman of AI-Ambia Sdn Bhd, Ar. Sze To has been instrumental in guiding the company from its formative years in the early 80's to the industry key player it is today, with an impressive portfolio of local and overseas projects to its credit. Recent successful undertakings by AI-Ambia include the Inti College Subang Jaya (Phase 1) and 2 Hampshire Condominium, Kuala Lumpur.

In a recent interview with B & I, Ar. Sze To took time off from his busy schedule to reminisce about AI-Ambia, the status quo of the industry and the way ahead.

B & I: On a personal level, you made a decisive transition from architect to master builder. What prompted you to make the change and what were the challenges you faced in the process?

Sze To Kok Yin (STKY): In 1985, I decided to retire from architecture; that does not mean I don't wish to be involved in the building industry! In fact, members of PAM asked me if it was "different on the other side of the industry" but there is no other side, we are all there to do something. When I left the practice, it was the wisdom of two young men, Ben Hong and Tang Juang Yew, who invited me to join AI-Ambia. Actually, there were five people, four plus Chairman and founder, Abdul Aziz bin Ahmad, a Quantity Surveyor, who decided to leave us during the recession in the 80's. As a matter of fact, he was the one to coin the name AI-Ambia which, as best as I can figure, means, prophetically, what is good.

The first decade of work was quite a struggle as our capital was small and we were learning the ropes, particularly so in the latter part of 80's when we met up with, unfortunately, clients for whom jobs were done and not paid for. When it came to the 90's, we changed our direction; at the time, we had amongst us in the industry three very good groups of contractors, i.e., Pilecon Engineering, Siah Brothers and Sato Koyo. We worked very closely with them in the sense that we became their collaborators; although we were taken on as sub-contractors, we were actually project managers for a number of their big projects. We learnt a lot from these established companies and managed to tide over our finances somewhat.

When the recession came in 1997, we were not badly affected, having learnt our lessons in the 80's. Our growth in the 90's was quite progressive. By 2000,

most of the big contractors, including our collaborators Pilecon Engineering and Siah Brothers, had slowed down and we had no alternative but to stand on our own feet.

B & I: In making the transition, why did you give up on architecture? Disillusionment?

STKY: No. I am still very interested in architecture and I am active in the Institute of Architects. I have been the President of PAM in the mid-70's and was recalled, in 2000, to the Council of PAM, I continue to participate in the Board of Architects, both in education and on practice matters and was last involved in the revision of the PAM standard contract. I was not disillusioned, I love architecture; in fact, the transition started a little bit earlier than 1985. I was one of those early "green" people; we formed a company called Turfgrass Sdn Bhd that is into hydro-seeding and landscaping, a very mechanical system of spreading seed on prepared ground or slopes to get plants to grow under ideal conditions. In fact, we were the ones responsible for the turf slopes along the Karak Highway en route to Genting Highlands. We have another company involved in turfing of golf courses and playgrounds.

My father was a contractor just before the War and Tang Juang Yew's grandfather was working with my father at the time. Somehow fate brought us together so, in that sense, here we are now, 3rd generation contractors working together. When I left the practice, I had a certain amount of intention of going into the "green" thing and being involved in its pioneering development but, as I said, I was offered and approached by these two young men and, knowing that they were good people to work with, I went in. So, within these efforts, there is no regret and no disillusionment; I am very fond of architecture.



During my practice, I had the opportunity to do most types of work. I was project architect as well as joint project director with the late Datuk Kington Loo for the old KL Hilton which was, at the time, the first high-rise and biggest building in Kuala Lumpur. Subsequently, I came into quite a number of commercial and industrial buildings and housing development work. So, with all that expertise, I thought it would be quite good and timely to move. Anyway, in summary, it was from hard lessons in the 1980's that we learnt not only about the economics of buildings, cash-flow problems and how to overcome them but also the politics of people wanting certain things but not prepared to pay for it. As we progressed, we got to be a bit more cautious and protective.

B & I: It has been said that “an architect’s dream is the builder’s nightmare”. With so much technological advances in both the industries, how valid is this statement today?

STKY: We are all in the same camp and I refuse to say which side I am on mainly because, as I said before, we are all there as a group to implement a project. The consultants supply the information on the intent of the project and we apply the effort to get it done within the agreed concept of the contract. Happy to say, in quite a number of projects, we have tried to reduce wastage, in building materials, wooden formwork and, more importantly, the wastage of time. Delays in trying to figure out what the consultants wanted were avoided by us helping and working closely with our sub-contractors. We are not saying they are no good but technology is changing all the time and one needs to keep up.

For our Abu Dhabi project, we recently interviewed staff from Manila and Jakarta and the first thing I like

to tell them is that ‘your contract is for three years so please look at that as 10% of your working life and, therefore, make an effort to enjoy your work’. Constructing complex buildings is not a problem; matter of fact, it is a challenge, as long as the technology is there and the people to work with.

Complicated and complex buildings is not a nightmare because today we have tower cranes, piled concrete, machinery to bend bars and so on – it is a question of controlled technology. So the “architect’s dream, contractor’s nightmare” is not an issue; it can only be a nightmare if architects who design complex buildings have no idea exactly of what they want and, by not being able to give information out to contractors in time, they create a situation where all parties find themselves waiting for decisions. Consultants have a duty to ensure that contractors are issued information promptly so that they build in accordance with agreed specifications and standards.

B & I: What, in your view, are the latest trends and developments in the architectural industry, particularly in Malaysia?

STKY: There is a growing number of architects who have gone overseas, developed their craft and gained international recognition for their work. At the same time, there is also another group who practice locally but have not equipped themselves sufficiently in the business of architecture. They can draw and design but do not know how to build or how to collect money. In no time, you will see that they cannot run the business of architecture.

In any case, local architectural work has improved a lot – two reasons for this. One is exposure, to foreign-imported ideas – projects like the Twin Towers had a lot of influence on the thinking of Malaysian architects. We knew the principles of high-rise buildings but had neither the practical knowledge nor the experience to do it ourselves. So they (foreigners) came in, we worked together and watched them and learned. Today, Malaysian contractors are just as good as most international ones.



Just for the record, Putrajaya was developed by locals! The second reason is that, in the last few years, many young architects are pushing up the profession with a renewed sense of design incorporating international and Malaysian values.

B & I: In these time of cost consciousness and conservation, are cultural motifs (Malaysian, in this case) still pertinent or relevant in architectural design or is functionality the primary consideration?

STKY: We have to be careful about this; in the time of Datuk Hisham Albakri and Datuk Kington Loo, the Government and some parts of the society were pushing for “Malaysian architecture”. What is “Malaysian architecture”? Is it defined by putting up a building with a Minangkabau roof? We all said no, it has to be irrespective of any particular race and has to evolve from an integration of all cultures. You could justify the example of the rebana-shaped LUTH Building in Jalan Ampang, that it was symbolic of their investment but in terms of returns it was not a good investment but as an image, it was good for the Pilgrims Fund Board.

B & I: In other words, it is difficult to define Malaysian architecture, surely not by putting on a Minangkabau roof?

STKY: At the time when Datuk Hisham Albakri designed the Bank Bumiputra Building, that’s exactly what he did! The focus, really, should be on tropical architecture, i.e., buildings that are comfortable in the tropics and are functional and culture-based. Functionality is of the greater essence but culture is also vital. One of the buildings that have all these elements is Parliament House. It was a group of architects from the Public Works Department who were successful in coming up with what is, in many ways, Malaysian architecture.

When Putrajaya was developed, there were cost and space constraints for the Government in the building of modern Malaysian structures. By the way, credit has to be given to Dr. Mahathir for propping up the industry at that time with the building of the Twin Towers, Menara KL, F1 Sepang Racing Circuit and Putrajaya. All this Petronas money was for public expenditure so I don’t see why people criticise these projects. If you are talking about returns, then look at Big Ben and the buildings in Rome. It is not so much a question of how they cost but rather of value for money.



(L - R) Publisher Eric Tan, Ar. Sze To Kok Yin & Ar. Ben Hong

B & I: Of the many successful construction projects undertaken by AI-Ambia Sdn Bhd thus far, which would you rate as the most challenging and why?

STKY: I would need to clarify here that the success of the projects has been due to teamwork, to the effort and energy of these two young people and the other directors. Of the many projects, the more recent one would be the Maldives project for Club Med, not so much in terms of value but of the challenges of logistics, of working in a new environment. In the course of completing the renovation of Club Med Cherating, we were recommended by their French architect to negotiate directly for the Maldives contract. We did not know the conditions there, how things were done; neither materials nor workmen were available there and a system of construction had to be devised. It was very exciting and satisfying, in that sense, and work had to be done within a constrained period of time and to finish before the high season! We even had to hire and fly over two cooks to prepare Malaysian food for our workmen!

B & I: With expertise in both architecture and building construction, how do you view the relevance and/or the role of information technology (IT) in both of these industries?

STKY: There is a growing influence of IT on the management side, in its application to our work

schedules, compilation and follow up activities. Having gone into ISO 2000, IT has enabled us to be linked with our site office on scheduling systems and coordination of drawings for structural work, incorporating the installation of mechanical and electrical services. In structural work these days clients prefer that contractors, as opposed to consultants, coordinate the drawings and we do this in 3-dimensional form, looking at all the problems before we start to build. For example, in 3-D form, we are able to foresee and provide for holes in beams for pipes to go through so as to avoid unnecessary hacking. We were the first ones, in fact, to work on this 3-D coordination of drawings which also helps in our graphical presentation to clients, in detailing to them the sequential stages of construction, from the basement up to the top – previously it was just a matter of filling in the price and submitting the tender.

On your comment of electronic submission of tenders, we find that Putrajaya had allowed this. I must say that, nowadays, on the use of IT in project administration and management, here in Malaysia the practice is quite good and up to date, compared to world standards. It was used extensively in the KLIA project where the Japanese contractor was well linked with his Tokyo office on all on-going site operations and changes.

B & I: **What pointers, if any, would you give Malaysian builders who are venturing into large-scale projects overseas?**

STKY: We have only two overseas projects to date, the experience of Maldives and the one in Abu Dhabi where we are still learning. As for Al-Ambia, the first thing we did was to make exploratory visits to Abu Dhabi, to talk to people who were already operating there, in this case, the Zelan people, and to understand the country's administrative systems, their work ethics and local conditions, the material and workforce requirements and how best to source them.

In the UAE, and the Middle East, for that matter, you need to have certain contacts and, therefore, a local agent should be engaged to represent your interests, to deal with, say, logistics or the port authority, because once you get snags in any of these areas, it is going to affect your project. For a nation like the UAE, they have many good systems in place because they can buy the technology but when it comes to material and manpower, most of these have to be drawn from outside the country.