

Focus on comfortable and practical design

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For Michael Ching, founder and director of CH&I Architecture Sdn Bhd, his journey to becoming an architect started when a kind-hearted lecturer gave him words of encouragement that have stayed with him until today.

Initially, Ching started studying engineering but found that it did not suit him. He then moved on to a twinning architecture degree with Deakin University, where he completed part of the course in Malaysia before heading to Australia.

He recalls how he struggled in his first semester, as he came from the science stream in school and was not very good at designing. He credits his lecturer Tony Liew as the person who helped him overcome his struggles and set his heart on his chosen profession.

Ching recalls, "What he told me changed everything. He said, 'Whatever you present, you make references. That means that you read, which means you have interest. Even though you say you are struggling with the design, the output is there. I am really surprised that you tell me you are struggling. From what I see, you're doing great!' Then I realised I had put too much expectation on myself."

In Australia, Ching found inspiration and influence from Glenn Murcutt, a famous local architect known for his practical designs that embrace the environment the building is located in. He was also inspired by Datuk Ken Yeang, known for his sustainable approach to design.

Ching was unable to complete his architecture degree in Australia because of the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis. He returned home with only a Bachelor of Arts (Architecture) degree as the course in Australia gave students a first degree after three years and a degree in architecture two years later.

Ching completed this degree at the University of Malaya (UM) in 2000. Incidentally, he met his future business partners Ivan Mah and T H Lim at UM, where they were course mates. After graduation, he worked at several firms in Malaysia and Singapore, before starting CH&I Architecture in 2010.

Design philosophy

The practice focuses on designing homes that follow fundamental principles. "Architecture is like fashion — it has to be comfortable and practical," says Ching.

The fundamental principles include orientation, shading, insulation, daylight and ventilation, with an additional design principle called "integrated space".

The orientation of the house is important because, if it is wrong, you have to do a lot more to regain what is lost, such as comfort and the money spent on air conditioning to cool the house.

Orientation that is not ideal leads to the second principle — shading. Owners of homes facing west or east may need to consider using shading devices such as a blind or an awning to reduce the heat entering the house.

"A basic tip for shading devices is that if it is less than one-third of your window height, it won't work. So, if your window is 10ft, then the shading must be 3½ft," says Ching.

Next is insulation, which he says is uncommon in Malaysia but something that can enhance the comfort level in a home. Besides mineral wool insulation, materials

(Clockwise from right) The hydroponic 'wall' provides vegetables and fruit for its owners; the integrated space, which can be converted into an open space or private dining or yoga space; and a corridor that is lit by natural light



such as soil, water and even air can be used for insulation. He recommends that homes have double roofs, if possible.

"For double roofs, there has to be ventilation between the first and second roofs, to move the hot air out," says Ching. For a condo, he adds, walls should be insulated to reduce heat entering the home and for cool air to escape. Insulation is also a good sound dampener, along with being fire-resistant.

Next is daylight, or allowing daylight to enter the house. "If you look at our designs, most of them are very slim because, for daylight, the rule of thumb is that it can penetrate a home only up to six metres,"



Nara houses in Gamuda Gardens offer different façades, giving the illusion that the linkhouses are semidecks. The exposed red bricks offer a homely feel.



Ching: Architecture is like fashion — it has to be comfortable and practical

"We need a space that has dual functionality ... more so during the pandemic. We wanted to create a multi-function space, one that can change the mood of the setting and be used for other purposes," he says.

Hydroponic House

A project in which Ching was able to incorporate most of these design principles was a bungalow in Petaling Jaya's SS3, fondly called Hydroponic House, owing to a customised hydroponic system that takes pride of place on the west side of the property.

Extensions to the house, which was completed in 2020, were made to increase the built-up area from 4,000 sq ft to 6,000 sq ft. It gave the owners a larger master bedroom, an internal courtyard and additional space for the family to use.

The hydroponic system allows the owners to grow vegetables and fruits. So far, Ching says, they have been producing so much that they give it away to their neighbours.

Initially, that side of the house was to be a green wall, until the owner wondered whether it would be possible to plant fruits and vegetables rather than the standard plants, since the maintenance would be the same but the former would at least produce something beneficial for the family. After doing some research, Ching came up with the current system, which has borne much fruit — and vegetables — since.

The water and nutrients are pumped to the plants using mechanical pumps, which are powered by the sun, thanks to the photovoltaic panels on the roof. The nutrients are mixed and stored in an underground pit covered with a wooden deck. There is a discharge opening for water so that the pit does not become a pond.

In front of the wooden deck is an integrated space linked to the dining area and a small gym. Ching says it has a low-emissivity (Low-E) and tempered glass ceiling, letting in plenty of daylight (Low-E coating on glass minimises the amount of ultraviolet and in-

PICTURES BY CH&I ARCHITECTURE

Good response to Phase 1B of UEM Sunrise's Senadi Hills

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Phase 1B of UEM Sunrise Bhd's Senadi Hills in Iskandar Puteri, Johor, has seen a 83% take-up rate since its launch last December.

"We are constantly staying ahead of the curve in anticipating our customers' changing needs, ensuring that a future-proof UEM Sunrise development can only appreciate in value and have a long shelf life," chief operations officer (southern) Zamri Yusof tells *City & Country* in an email.

With a gross development value (GDV) of RM91 million, Phase 1B comprises 120 units of 22ft by 70ft, 2-storey garden homes. The units will come in 4-bedroom, 3-bathroom layouts with built-ups ranging from 2,185 to 2,317 sq ft and prices starting from RM659,900. They are due for completion in December 2022.

The residential enclave caters for multigenerational families. Residents of all ages can enjoy the green spaces in the residential eco-sanctuary, which are wheelchair-friendly. "Facilities such as a 2.5km jogging track, children's playground, outdoor gym, mini tai chi area and plaza will



Zamri: We are constantly staying ahead of the curve in anticipating our customers' changing needs

provide respite for the whole family to unwind and reconnect with each other after the daily grind. The monthly maintenance fee will be determined by the residents after the resident association is set up," says Zamri.

According to the developer, Phase 1B units will be suitable for buyers looking for houses in strategic locations near established amenities. It is also suited for professionals working in Singapore, as it is convenient for them to commute via the Causeway and Malaysia-Singapore Second Link. Apart from that, it will appeal to buyers from the surrounding areas such as Bukit Indah, Horizon Hills and Nusa Bestari looking for an upgrade, as well as investors seeking rental income and capital gain. About 70% of the units are aimed



The freehold 62.18-acre Senadi Hills has a GDV of RM408 million

at owner-occupiers while the rest will be marketed to investors.

The previous launch, Phase 1A, has seen a take-up rate of 88% since its launch in June last year. With a GDV of RM81 million, it comprises 112 units of 20ft by 70ft double-storey garden homes with built-ups of 2,088 to 2,241 sq ft and prices starting from RM623,900.

Prices of landed residential properties are considered more stable than those of high-rise properties. Supported by the Home Ownership Campaign, which was extended until Dec 31 this year, as well as financial incentives offered by developers, affordably priced landed properties should continue to enjoy strong demand, says Zamri.

"The take-up rates of houses in Senadi Hills have been encouraging despite being

launched in the middle of the pandemic last year and [during] the border closures in Singapore. We are optimistic that our customers will continue to seek quality and affordable products when the borders reopen and most economic activities resume," he adds.

The freehold 62.18-acre Senadi Hills has a GDV of RM408 million and will comprise a total of 398 residential units and 20 shopoffices. The township is expected to be completed in 2025. Nearby amenities include Mall of Medini, AEON Bukit Indah, Tesco Bukit Indah, NSK Trade City, Anjung Neighbourhood Centre, EduCity Iskandar, Legoland Malaysia, Gleneagles Hospital Medini Johor and Horizon Hills Golf and Country Club. It is also easily accessible via the Lebuhraya Kota Iskandar and Jalan Ismail Sultan (Iskandar Coastal Highway).

RENTAL MARKET

Mismatch of supply and demand

frared light that can pass through glass). A sliding barn door transforms the use of this space. When the door is opened, the space connects to the outdoors and can be used for social settings. When it is closed, the area can be an intimate dining area or used for yoga.

Within the house, Ching points to the slim spaces he designed with skylights that allow more daylight into the house and its internal courtyard. Moreover, in the walk-in wardrobe, there is a window and a skylight to allow natural light into the space.

Nara, Gamuda Gardens

Another project that Ching has worked on is Nara, a precinct of terraced houses with a unique façade. It is located in Gamuda Gardens in Kundang, Selangor, and was completed in 2020.

"The [developer] wanted a lifestyle resort-like design that offers a sense of excitement and a back-to-nature concept," says Ching, adding that the company did not want a monotonous façade.

On a row of 10 houses, there can be six different designs. For instance, the pitched roof differs from one house to the next, giving an illusion that the houses are semi-detached.

Adding to the design is the use of high-grade red exposed bricks that give the house a warm, homely feel, he says.

Also, the roofs of the houses are metal and not tiles. The developer agreed to this idea and the concern that the houses would look industrial never materialised, Ching says with a smile. The roofs have been insulated using bulk insulation to reduce thermal heat transfer and dampen the sound of the rain hitting the roof.

Design from the heart

Apart from houses and projects with developers, CH&I Architecture has upcoming projects such as a 49-storey condominium called 10 Stonor in KLCC and a 4-storey, 112,000 sq ft space for food and beverage, as well as retail, outlets called PJ Box in Petaling Jaya.

Ching offers sage advice for future architects: "All the new architects that join us are highly aesthetic-minded; they copy what they see [in magazines]. Their design may end up being a monumental building, but the soul is not there, the comfort is not there."

"We usually tell youngsters, 'What you see is good. Now, close the book, pick up your pen and design. Design by what inspires you, what you have learnt, what you have felt, and you create a design from there. That is architecture. Not being a copycat.'" ■

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tential to see more growth due to its popularity as a renter's destination. "But as we have seen in the past several years, commercial demand has been under constant pressure due to high supply but stagnating demand. It has been a challenge for both developers and commercial building operators to come up with new and innovative ways of attracting tenants amid a very competitive market."

With the new norm of working remotely and the sharing economy model of co-working spaces, the suburbanisation of offices and commercial centres seen about 15 years ago could be given another boost.

"Having commercial hubs close to the residence of the talent pool minimises travel time and has its benefits. More competitive rents in these out-of-city urban centres with facilities and quality that are of similar grade to those in the city area could attract local and foreign companies," says Sulaiman.

As with any other developing/redeveloping areas, however, progress may be hindered if rapid growth and gentrification are not kept under control to ensure balance between supply and demand.

"The market remains challenging, and even when we overcome the pandemic, we will have to face the underlying challenge of supply



The Kerinchi LRT station is one of the transport hubs in the area

and demand mismatches, employment- and income-related challenges as well as geopolitical concerns in the market. Growth should be nurtured carefully to be in line with market demand to avoid an unsustainable bubble effect," he says.

Wong opines that the magnetic pull of Kampung Kerinchi will be in the integrated developments that play an integral part in the overall ecosystem of work, live and play. The corporate office tower cluster will create demand for the surrounding residential towers and be supported by the retail malls in one place, which qualifies as a self-sustaining locality, and even have a spillover effect on areas like Pantai Dalam.

The rents for both residential ■

and commercial properties in Kampung Kerinchi will likely remain stable in the medium term, not to mention having the capacity to cushion the negative impact of Covid-19, says Wong.

"The large imminent supply in the larger context of the property and commercial sector of Greater KL has slowed rental growth as a whole. Similarly, the planned supply of high-rise residential units and office buildings will likely cause rents to increase slowly but surely after a period of economic recovery. However, this will take place over a period of time until the economic conditions are better in the future."