Profiles of distinction

In the first part of our series, we speak to innovative minds that have transformed the city skyline with their level of innovation

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The building industry comprises many areas of specialisation and components coming together as typically seen in a development project. The developer's input, architect's vision and industry specialist's supply of relevant products are all required to produce the property developments that address the needs of society. Here's what some of the movers and shakers in the building industry have to say about how their different roles have a positive impact on society.

Ar Hud Bakar, principal, RSP Architects Sdn Bhd

Meeting the tall order of designing influential buildings that shape and enhance the city's skyline is RSP Architects principal Hud Bakar whose practice has grown to a head count of 200 people in Malaysia and about 1,000 internationally.

"We are currently embarking on a new RSP in terms of design and projecting a new image. Besides being practical, our designs are more intense, expressive and sexy in a way. While our completed buildings are still good and evergreen, we are mindful of the evolving needs of developers and buyers. Having been in the practice for a long time and after so many successful launches and projects, we are very familiar with the needs and commercial value of projects. Our new wave of designs is a direct respond to this," he observes.

"Globally, building design is becoming more adventurous. RSP has updated its system including using Building Information Modeling (BIM) at our office. Therefore, we are able to create better designs using advanced modelling and visualisation, leading to more adventurous and interesting architecture in terms of form. In a small way, we hope to bolster our country's image in the collection of buildings and to promote architecture tourism."

The firm's recent projects include the Naza Tower and Tabung Haji Tower in KL. The spiral, twisted office buildings — among the first in Malaysia — were completed earlier this year.

Other ongoing projects include the Matrade Exhibition & Convention Centre in KL with its "expressive, curvilinear forms" housing the largest exhibition space in the region.

Another iconic project is Warisan Merdeka, which is currently under construction, of which the firm is the executive architect. "The building design is brave and forward-looking, representing our country's aspiration," says Hud.

In the pipeline is the 8 Conlay branded residences in KL comprising three blocks of spiraling towers that are curvilinear in silhouette.

"The towers will be twisted, fluid and curvy in form, embracing its surroundings. The design is adventurous yet still exists within the limits of its context," he shares.

Commenting on the building industry, he believes that housing remains a need for people — so the government should encourage house purchases by relaxing certain rules and regulations as developers now "seem to have their hands tied in so many ways". He believes this would encourage the real estate industry to excel as the construction industry is one of the major drivers of the country's economy.

"At RSP, we always do our best. Every project is special to us. Each architectural design is unique to the site. Besides design, buildings have to be practical and commercially viable. Through strong design fundamentals and many successfully completed buildings, we have enough experience to push the boundaries of design to the next level."

"People today can 'read' the architecture of a building. Apart from their core value, well-crafted buildings contribute to society and their surroundings. In today's competitive environment, any building that goes up has to have an edge over the others. The stroke of an architect's pen today is even mightier than yesterday," he concludes.

Ar Jeffrey Ling, director, Architects 61 Sdn Bhd

The story of four classmates graduating in 1961 and establishing their architectural firm in 1974 formed the basis of the name Architects 61.

"Just like Hud starting his RSP practice in Singapore, we were one of the 'big three' there back then alongside RSP and DP Architects," says Jeffrey Ling, director of Architects 61, tracing the firm's origins.

"Tay Lee Soon, the chairman, has since retired in Singapore but is still the chairman in Malaysia. As the firm started operations in 1974, all the directors have dual registration including in Malaysia."

Being one of the pioneers, Ling recalls packing his bags to Dubai in 1988 as he had wanted to work "somewhere more interesting in Asia" at a time when hardly anyone knew about Dubai. His work stint there for about two years ended just before the Gulf War started in 1990.

The effort paid off, with him securing projects from Dubai to Malaysia.

"We are a medium-sized firm of over 40 people in our KL and Penang offices while the Singapore office has about 160 employees. Almost half of the 20 architects in KL are registered, with more than seven having 25 years or more experience each.

"We are top heavy because we are in a service industry and serious in our delivery of projects. Our philosophy is to strive for excellence. We want to excel in everything we do — from the project inception to the delivery stage. We strive to deliver more than what the client would expect," he adds.

Having undertaken its maiden job designing The Ritz-Carlton, Kuala Lumpur, for YTL Corp Bhd in 1990, it

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also conceptualised the Ritz Carlton serviced apartments followed by Stonor Park, KL. Other projects include the design for the first phase of Valencia, Sungai Buloh that was developed by Gamuda Land in 2000.

There was also the first design phase undertaken for Kemuning Hills in Kota Kemuning, Shah Alam, that was developed by Hicom-Gamuda Development. The firm has also designed other projects including M City, Lakeville Residences and The Horizon Residences in KL as well as i-SOHO at i-City in Shah Alam.

"We brought the concept of resort home living into the Klang Valley," he enthuses, adding that the design of Verdana by BRDB Developments Sdn Bhd located in Kiara North, Segambut, was also done by the firm.

Ar Lillian Tay, senior principal, VERITAS Architects Sdn Bhd

Adding a touch of brilliance to the high-rises and other buildings it designs, VERITAS Architects is a multi-disciplinary practice with its core services focused on architecture besides other supporting design disciplines in interior design, landscape and sustainability.

"VERITAS has over 300 staff with its headquarters in KL, and offices in Penang, Johor and overseas including Ho Chi Minh City, Mumbai, Saudi Arabia and Melbourne," says Lillian Tay, senior principal of VERITAS Architects.

Sharing her views on the local building industry, she believes mega projects have the power to transform our cities as well as build confidence and national pride.

"The scale and impact of mega projects such as KLCC and the Petronas Towers have put Malaysia on the global map and launched KL's transformation into a world-class city. These large complex projects require the highest level of design and delivery. However, all the towers at KLCC were previously and are still currently dominated by international architects," highlights Tay. She advocates a change of mindset for clients to engage home-grown local practices and help further build the capacity and confidence of Malaysian professional firms to compete internationally.

The current Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) deputy president believes Malaysian architecture firms have been honing their skills for years — and a few including RSP, GDP Architects, Hijjas Associates and VERITAS are "top Malaysian firms that are prepared and able to handle the scale and complexity" of such large projects moving forward.

"With our experience and in-depth local knowledge, we are confident we can design and deliver these large developments, including iconic projects with national significance. Unfortunately, many clients, even government agencies and GLCs, don't think our Malaysian architects are at par and prefer to engage Western architects. Worse still, this results in loss of foreign exchange and fewer job creation opportunities within Malaysia. We're trying hard to change this legacy mindset in our local building industry," she expresses.

"At VERITAS, we work very hard to grow the firm and build capacity to compete internationally. We find that Asians tend to be more entrepreneurial, resulting in the whole architecture industry being splintered into many small companies. We need to grow more large firms to handle large, complex projects that have great impact on our cities and urban environment. VERITAS is proud to undertake its first large mixed-use development project at KLCC that includes the first Jumeirah Hotel and Sofitel So Hotel in Malaysia.

"It was a landmark for us to have won a design competition for this major project at KLCC for an international client — hopefully a step towards our goal to be a premier design firm worldwide". VERITAS is also working on the design of the first W Hotel coming up at KLCC by 2017.

Edwin Yang, acting CEO (property development division, KL), BRDB Developments Sdn Bhd

Known for developing high-end residences with a difference, BRDB Developments needs no introduction.

"BRDB is a high-end developer. We rely on three main pillars — intelligent design, embracing cosmopolitan living and uplifting aesthetics that have become BRDB's DNA. We are not just selling homes but offer an inspired lifestyle. Our developments are 'inspired by the richness of life'", shares Edwin Yang, acting CEO (property development division, KL) of BRDB Developments.

"Among our developments is The Troika located within the KLCC area. Designed by Norman Foster + Partners, it has won accolades and the CNBC International Property Award for its impressive architecture. Another successful development is One Menerung behind Bangsar Shopping Centre, KL. It was so sought-after that it lifted the profile of condominiums in Bangsar. From its launch to completion, the value has since doubled and created a new benchmark there.

"This was followed by Serai in Bukit Bandaraya, KL, which is currently under construction and scheduled for completion in June 2016. Serai is another resounding success and again, it's about lifestyle aspirations. We didn't spare any cost in developing Serai in terms of giving something beyond expectations to the buyers," he says.

BRDB has also developed premier waterfront homes in Iskandar Malaysia, Johor Baru where one can "buy a home and park one's boat in a private berth in the backyard." Phase 1 was almost sold out when launched and news of upcoming phases has excited loyal BRDB followers.

BRDB also has plans to develop an integrated township in Rawang called Taman Sari. "It is a well-master-planned community with generous open spaces. In this township, one can expect amenities such as international schools and commercial components nearby. BRDB's commitment to allocating pocket parks within the township and 12m-wide linear parks at the back of the residences saw Phase 1 sold out in a record two days. Phase 2, meanwhile, will be launched in the last quarter of 2015.

"BRDB builds more than just homes. We create communities that are not bound by physical boundaries but shared values. We build meeting spaces, community centres and parks to keep people connected. We delight in turning ordinary communities into extraordinary ones. Essentially, BRDB is known for its iconic communities that stand the test of time."

Datuk Ir Jamaludin Osman, group managing director, I&P Group Sdn Berhad

I&P Group, a wholly owned subsidiary of Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB), was formed in May 2009 after the successful merger and rationalisation exercise between three companies — Island & Peninsular Sdn Bhd, Pelangi Sdn Bhd and Petaling Garden Sdn Bhd. The new entity became one of the few leading developers in Malaysia with vast experience in the property business.

The group has garnered a reputation for developing townships with impressive track records in terms of completion, timeliness and quality over the years.

"I&P Group today maintains the same endeavour: The development of whole townships and nurturing of wholesome communities. This has been the paramount vision from day one. Over the decades, this focus has been sustained by growing expertise and a value system that puts the joy of living for people on the same stature as that of business profits. We strive to deliver homes, facilities and an environment that would facilitate the development of sustainable communities, meet customer satisfaction and benefit our stakeholders," he says.

"As a township developer, we build various types of homes catering from the lower to higher income categories. Additionally, we provide amenities such as recreational spaces, schools and commercial areas within the development for the benefit of residents and those of the neighbouring communities," he adds. The Alam Damai township in Cheras, KL, with a 30-acre central park for residents as well as the surrounding communities and the 31-acre Alam Impian town park in Shah Alam have become central recreation zones for residents and visitors since they were opened.

"Moving forward, the I&P Group will continue to undertake township developments. However, the approach will be more market-sensitive, taking into consideration affordability. Besides the real estate sector, the economy, social and education aspects of the community are equally important to us."

Gladys Goh, group general manager, Nippon Paint Malaysia Group

Product innovation makes a world of difference when addressing issues of sustainability governing the built industry. Nippon Paint, having introduced a series of industry product firsts — as seen in its Odour-less, Spot-less and Zero-VOC (volatile organic compound) ranges — raised the clarion call for the industry to become environmentally friendly. In line with the green movement, it also introduced two industry-first coatings that improve the surroundings with solar effect reducing the temperature by 5°C.

"The strategy was simple but effective by promoting paint innovation. We offered people the possibility of changing their lifestyles in practical yet innovative ways marked by a series of paint innovations," says Gladys Goh, group general manager of Nippon Paint Malaysia Group.

Nippon Paint's "Paint all Surfaces" campaign showcased the paint's flexibility on different surfaces. It also revolutionised the industry with its Momento special effect range, which adds a sensorial, 3D texture effect. That in turn is enhanced by its latest Momento Designer series, which showcases endless possibilities for painting on walls with metallic, velvet and stone textured special effects. It is perfect for internal and external walls, mimicking the look of granite.

Ar Hud Bakar
RSP Architects

Datuk Ir Jamaludin Osman
I&P Group

Ar Lillian Tay
VERITAS Architects

This is the first of a seven-part series on **Building With A Difference**. *Read more about these industry players in the coming issues of* Living&Property