Rising to recognition

Jeffrey Ling of Architects 61 Sdn Bhd shares his thoughts on going the extra mile for clients and designing for the local market

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The founding of Architects 61 Pte Ltd points to the story of four young visionaries who joined forces to form one of the architectural industry's leading firms. Formed in 1974 by four classmates who graduated from Melbourne University, Australia in 1961 — hence the digits in its name — the firm took Singapore by storm and rose to become one of the three big names in the country's architecture scene.

This success encouraged the founders to set up a branch in neighbouring country Malaysia. Roping in the help of Jeffrey Ling, Architects 61 Sdn Bhd (Architects 61) was established in 1993 and obtained its licence to practise in 1995. Since then, the firm has grown to become one of the more established architectural practices in the country.

Making its mark

Locally, Architects 61 has been involved in a myriad of projects demanding a wide range of skills and expertise. Aside from commercial and residential developments, the practice has also been called upon to undertake the design of hotels, retirement homes, educational institutions, medical facilities as well as places of worship.

More than once, the team members at Architects 61 have also had to flex their creative muscles in undertaking urban planning, conservation and infrastructure-related projects.

Ling — who currently holds the position of director at Architects 61 — admits that the tasks they find themselves in are extremely varied, but the firm is more than capable of coping with the demand and challenges at hand.

"The range of work is very wide, and the skills required is available within the firm. Our expertise would be leaning more towards complex or design-intensive developments."

How does Architects 61 cope with the specialised demands of specific projects? The answer lies in embracing technology. Rather than shying away, the firm adapts technology to improve its productivity and efficiency. Ling reveals that Architects 61 is an early adopter of the Building Information Modelling (BIM) and Project Information Management (PIM) systems.

It is no wonder then that the firm is consistently entrusted to take on one high-profile project after another. This includes

Wisma Shell in Cyberjaya was the first building to receive a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification in Malaysia

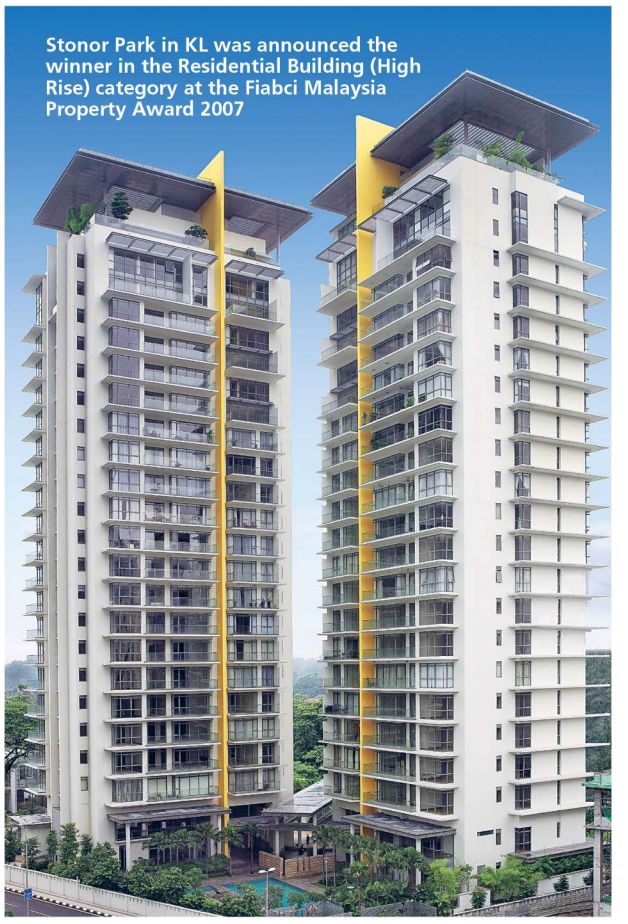
D'sara Sentral in Shah Alam was ranked as Highly Commended in the Commercial High Rise Development Malaysia category at the Asia Pacific Property Awards 2015

undertaking the design of Wisma Shell — also known as Bangunan Lestari Kumpulan Emkay in Cyberjaya, which was the first building to receive a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification in Malaysia.

Commissioned by Shell Malaysia to design a five-storey building with three sub-basements, Architects 61 did just that and more by completing the project within the budget while maintaining high standards of quality. This was even more impressive judging from the fact that the firm completed its task within 12 months — a record considering the time needed to obtain all the necessary approvals and Certificate of Fitness — a requirement laid out earlier on by the client.

Wisma Shell garnered further recognition as a pioneer in the field of sustainable buildings when it won the Citation Award in the Commercial Architecture category at the FuturArc Green Leadership Award 2011 and came out tops in the Sustainable Development category in the Fiabci (International Real Estate Federation) Malaysia Property Award 2012.

Infinity in Penang came out tops in the Residential Building (High Rise) category at the Fiabci Malaysia Property Award 2011



Stonor Park in KL was announced the winner in the Residential Building (High Rise) category at the Fiabci Malaysia Property Award 2007

The highs and lows

Projects undertaken by Architects 61 have received multiple acclaims on the local and international front, and Wisma Shell is not the first of the firm's projects to have been recognised at the Fiabci Malaysia Property Award. Three of its other projects — namely Stonor Park in Kuala Lumpur as well as Springtide Residences and Infinity in Penang, were announced as the winning projects in the Residential Building (High Rise) category at the Fiabci Malaysia Property Award in 2007, 2010 and 2011 respectively.

Springtide Residences has also received recognition at the PAM (Malaysian Institute of Architects) Awards 2010, garnering an Honorary Mention in the Multiple Residential (High Rise) category. Wisma Great Eastern in Penang and 2 Hampshire in KL — both projects also undertaken by the firm — repeated this feat when they received an Honourable Mention in the Conservation Building category and Mention in the Multiple Residential (High Rise) category respectively at the PAM Awards 2008.

Ling shares that the firm's team tries to apply a defining quality to each of its project. "The firm has established a definitive criterion that whatever project we undertake, it must be of a publishable quality. The standard that we adopt in the practice is that it must not only look good from far but should also not be far from good".

By keeping in mind this philosophy, the firm has no qualms about going that extra mile for its clients, as this drives the team to work towards the ultimate goal of delivering results that surpass their clients' expectations.

"There is always a balance in our work whereby the project should be kept within the budget (and sometimes below it) upon completion. The firm is known for its timely and quality delivery adhering to stringent quality control that is kept within the budget. We strive for excellence in every facet of the delivery of our services to the client," Ling highlights.

In the twenty years that it has been established, Architects 61 has sailed through both calm and stormy seas. To Ling, one of the achievements that he is proudest of was witnessing the firm's rise from its humble start as a small practice to what it is today. The firm has repeatedly been ranked as the Top 10 Architects in Malaysia at the BCI Asia Top 10 Awards in 2007, 2010 and 2013.

He is quick to admit that the biggest challenge facing the firm today is recruiting like-minded people as talent is a rare resource — a problem that he notes is common in all organisations. However, he also reveals an even bigger challenge that comes from the industry players.

PHOTO BY **DD HOE**

"The biggest challenge is to get developers to adopt the standard Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) established by the Board of Architects Malaysia (LAM) under the Architects Act as most choose to ignore and contravene by having their own form of the law," he notes somewhat regretfully.

All hope is not lost however, as Ling expresses that he is thankful for the fact that all of the firm's clientele are in favour of adopting the gazetted Architects Act in all their engagements.

Localising designs

After years of experience in designing for the local market, Ling observes, "The current property market scene is very colourful and price-sensitive. We wish to see more depth in the final architectural product with more exchanges of philosophical dialogue. With the current dampened market, we believe that this is now the time to enrich our works with more depth as previously, the construction and property sectors were moving along at an incredible pace".

Cost is something that the Architects 61 team has become conscious about when creating designs for the local market. In Malaysia, the cost of the building usually comes up to roughly three times the cost of the land. This differs from its neighbouring country Singapore where regardless of the cost of the building, the cost of land will always be more expensive.

"In our case, whatever we put into the building affects the bottom line. We must be very conscious of this when designing and we only 'spend' at the right places to achieve the maximum effect whilst still creating a work of architecture and enhancing the value of the product for added premium from the commercial viewpoint," Ling adds.

The other thing the firm has to be mindful of is the local culture's influence and preference for more Malaysian-inspired designs. Hence, it has adopted a concept termed "Sustainable Contextualisation" whereby the architecture takes into account the features of the site, the surrounding environment as well as its purpose and use, all without forgetting the sustainable factor.

As Ling puts it, the product is a palette of all the responses from which a sense of its "Asian-ness" permeates the sense of place.

In order to stay ahead of the game, Architects 61 realises the need to consistently be informed and updated of the latest design trends that can inspire the team to push boundaries so as to differentiate themselves from the competition.

Ling reveals that this is done via a three-pronged strategy.

"The first is through attending conferences locally and overseas. All our architects in both the KL and Penang offices are encouraged to attend the annual International Architectural Design Conference (Datum). The second is by conducting yearly study visits locally and abroad to keep abreast of the latest architectural happenings and works. The last is through the subscription of various architectural and other related periodicals besides the progressive acquisition of architectural related publications and books in our extensive library".

Considering all that Architects 61 has accomplished, is there anything else that Ling hopes to achieve with the firm? "We aspire to contribute constructively to the richness of the local built environment in order to create a sense of space which would stir one's emotion and create a lasting impression as one journeys through the three-dimensional space which we have created. The satisfaction comes when the user beams from using our space". ◘

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

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