



# PART OF HIS DNA

PERTUBUHAN AKITEK MALAYSIA (PAM) ARCHITECTURAL AWARD WINNER **AR WILLIAM KHOO BOO CHUAN** TALKS ABOUT HIS CAREER AND OFFERS AN EXPERIENCED PERSPECTIVE ON GREEN ARCHITECTURE, WRITES KIRAN PILLAY



AR William Khoo

**AR** William Khoo spent his formative years in Penang during the mid-1960s to 1980s, enveloped by local architectural heritage while witnessing a period of rapid modernisation. Back then, “Komtar Tower was the tallest tower in Malaysia, and the beautiful colonial architecture of the straits era surrounded me,” the architect recalls. He is positive these scenes had an unconscious impact on his early development.

As a student, William would often doodle as he listened to his teachers. Passionate for all things creative, he would usually sketch comic book characters, buildings, and bridges. It was

his relative, a structural engineer, who first suggested that William should pursue a career in architecture upon viewing his renderings, particularly impressed by his structures.

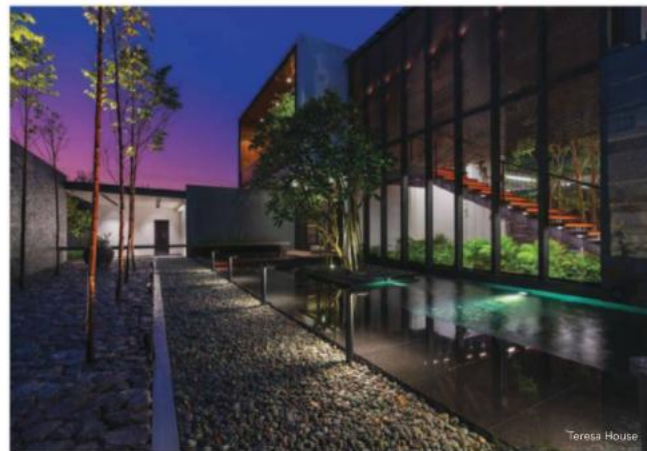
“I often joke that my engineer uncle advised me poorly about my career prospects. I could be doing much better, drawing comics for Marvel Studios,” he jests. That said, William has most certainly found success in his professional pursuits and is actively contributing to changing the architectural industry in Malaysia.

At the start of his career, newly married William relocated to Sarawak. “My wife and I felt that Kuching would be an interesting temporary landing ground for a fresh start,”

he says. Receiving an offer to work for a well-established architectural firm in Sarawak, Kumpulan Design (AKDI), William quickly found his footing in the industry.

The humble nature of Kuching locals and a good culture of work-life balance helped William and his wife realise they had found the ideal place to put down roots. “We were pleasantly surprised by the warmth we received despite being from West Malaysia and felt so much a part of the community,” he says. In 2000, William left AKDI to become a founder of the Design Network Architects (DNA) where he has been leading as director for the past two decades.

He has also recently been awarded the Silver Medal from Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) for his Borneo Mansion project. A luxury adaptation of Contextualism, the Borneo Mansion design incorporates elements of nature endemic to the larger Borneo narrative.



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The strata and textures seen in the Bornean tropics translate into functional living spaces as the creative layering of greenery adds depth, dimension, and elements of privacy in the modern setting. Occupants experience architectural luxury by immersing in nature, without sacrificing comfort or modern conveniences. This project encapsulates the ethos of minimalism DNA espouses.

William humbly credits the firm, that mostly focuses on small fit-outs and residential briefs, for the success of the Borneo Mansion project and many others. DNA changed William’s life, “I had always wanted to explore a more personable direction in my design work. I was interested in expanding my abilities and

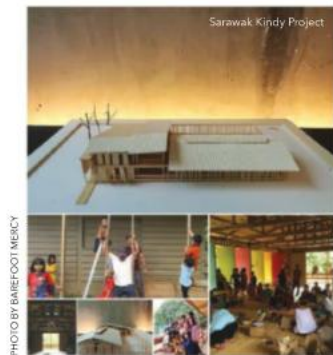
do other kinds of work, rather than just commercial work all the time.”

These days, William is motivated to expand the architectural discourse in Kuching, through the infusion of new concepts. He hopes DNA’s unique built works may positively influence design paradigms, “making modern design more accessible and palatable to the Kuching public in general.”

DNA avoids pursuing trends, opting instead to approach each project with a worldly outlook regardless of scale. The firm proceeds, “in favour of a more considered, directional and wholly tailored approach leading to contemporary designs of a refined and timeless nature,” William explains.



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Sarawak Kindy Project

PHOTO BY BAREFOOT MERCY

### GREEN IS THE NEW BLACK

William believes that the growing popularity of green architecture is due to climate change, poor city planning and the loss of public green spaces due to rapid urbanisation. "Green spaces have also become a luxury, especially in our dense urban concrete city environment," William explains, pointing to the steady erosion of Sarawak's green lung.

The architect feels that the state lends itself well to sustainable architecture. "We have always felt that building green is the logical thing to do. We are living in the tropics with an abundance of greenery, plentiful open spaces, and generous rainfall. Of course, we are to be green architects."



Borneo Mansion

DNA strives to demonstrate through its projects that green architecture is about more than growing trees around your structure. "One of the main challenges of designing housing is that it needs to be subtle, as it is for people to build their lives around. Instead of trying to be sustainable because it is on-trend," he says.

Green residences may be defined by homes that minimise energy consumption, incorporate sustainable strategies like water collection and using natural, recyclable resources for construction. "We believe building in the tropics offers us opportunities to connect interiors to the exterior, keeping spaces open and minimising the compartmentalisation of stale air," William says.

The firm incorporates green design and reduces wastage by prioritising energy efficiency, cross ventilation, and natural lighting. Once guided on the benefits, "the client is more interested in how well the house performs. It is less about looking good and more about creating a conducive environment

for the people living there."

William is not a fan of meaningless extravagance. "The temptation that comes with the luxury of a big-budget is that it can seduce clients into unnecessary wastefulness of resources." This leaves a larger carbon footprint, contributing little else to the overall functionality of a space.

He introduces an alternative notion, that luxury does not require the veneration of expensive things. Instead, "it can centre on something intangible that has value to the end-user," like open spaces, meaningful relationships, and quality of life. "Even time is an aspect that is short in supply today," William adds, enlightened in his perception of true luxury.

### EXPERIENCE IS THE BEST TEACHER

The experience of leading DNA has taught William much through hard lessons in



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managing team and market expectations. "I learned that leadership is important in operating my firm and creating a culture. Architecture is normally taught as an individual pursuit, but the truth is the process requires the investment of very many people to become successful," he admits.

Furthermore, William learned the art of balancing business with creativity. "Remaining relevant as a creative professional takes more than creativity – you need to understand the language of business. The problem is that design school does not teach the strategic

language that is essential to getting your job done, to pay the bills," he says.

Aware of the gap in knowledge, DNA encourages young students and trainees to learn about the industry through apprenticeships. "I learnt that the business of architecture is as important as the creative making aspect of the practice and not a walk in the park. It is a gruelling marathon that requires endurance and perseverance," he shares, having had to master a wide range of managerial skills on his feet.

Asked what his advice is to budding



DNA Office Studio

PHOTO BY DESIGN NETWORK ARCHITECTS



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architects, William reflects that architecture is a journey of discovery. "Refrain from self-indulgence. Apply deliberate strategy to create something distinctive, be bold and courageous. Not all architectural work needs to be iconic or visionary," he says, cautioning against excessiveness as he hopes to see an increase in projects that do more with less.

"Be committed to the pursuit of your ideals in your architectural work which will give your projects potency and infuse poetry, giving your buildings soul. It is about creating a timeless design that you grow to love more, the longer you stay," the architect says.

A benevolent mentor, William adds this last piece of wisdom, "make sure you get invited back to the housewarming party by your client." ■



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