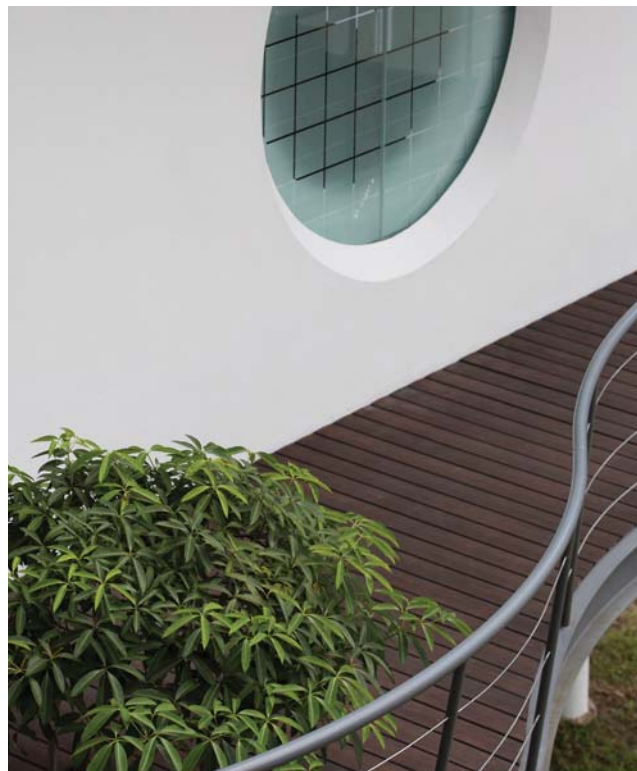


Home is where the art is

Kenneth Yeh of Marra+Yeh Architects speaks lovingly about his hometown and how his childhood memories laid the foundations for his craft today

PHOTOS BY MARRA+YEH ARCHITECTS



It is apt

that Kenneth Yeh compares his architecture to a simple but comforting bowl of *hor fun* soup. The award-winning Sydney-based architect, who runs a firm with his wife Carol Marra, retains a strong affection for his birthplace and hometown Ipoh, despite having left the country decades ago.

An expert in sustainable architecture and environmentalism, Yeh says while it was the influence of his professors at the University of Texas that put him on this career path, another factor was a wonderful childhood spent close to nature: on a farm in Tanjung Rambutan and a fish and shrimp farm outside Kampar owned by his family, going off into the jungle with his uncle to catch butterflies and frequent trips to Pangkor island where his father, a businessman and property developer, had built a resort.

No wonder the former Anglo-Chinese School boy misses the Ipoh of “back then” with its unspoiled greenery and the rigorous spirit that he felt people then seemed to have, which created a hunger to try new things and push for achievements that, perhaps, came with growing up in a young country.

He still visits home five or six times a year and has already managed to leave his mark on Ipoh with two projects, Kubik House and Stiletto House, which draw inspiration from the

“sophisticated” principles of traditional Malay houses. However, the architect says he considers it a privilege to have designed the projects rather than a personal achievement as it is akin to setting an example.

“Everyone said it could not be done. But I felt it could; you just needed to get the right people,” he recalls. “Ipoh still has good craftsmen and good materials [like the wood used in the houses that was sourced from a forest reserve in northern Perak]. But the craftsmen are skilled in traditional methods and can be quite conservative. This is because they gained their skill through trial and error and experience. So for me, it was how to take that skill and interpret it in a modern way. It was a very interesting but also sad experience because theirs is a dying craft with no young ones keen to take over.”

As for the Kubik and Stiletto houses, Yeh says, “There aren’t any buildings quite like these two in Malaysia in the sense of the thinking that went into it. And I’m not saying this driven by my ego but I’m more interested in how people can look at them and think ‘it can be done.’

“Outwardly, the design looks simple and non-fancy but it’s like the Ipoh chicken *hor fun*. It’s a very simple dish but have you ever tried making it? The simpler things are, the more difficult it is to actually do them.”





◀ The lower level is a open plan space that encompasses the kitchen and living area

▼ Designed to maximise its surrounding outdoor views, Yeh eschewed walls for 28 bi-fold glass doors for a panoramic view

Kubik House

The origins of Kubik House may be traced all the way back to 2008, when a German client approached Yeh to design a home in a gated community located some 30 minutes from Ipoh town. The owner, Kubik, did not

want anything ostentatious but rather something that suited Malaysia's tropical climate and which would allow his only daughter to interact with nature and play outside in the sun.

The uneven and slanted terrain of the 10,000 sq ft site with a 3m drop was a major challenge as levelling it was not an option. To create a highly efficient and high-performance home, Yeh took into account the natural elements of the site, factoring in wind directions, the kind of vegetation that could be planted there and the angles at which the sun hit the land at different times of the day, among other things.



Kubik's functional sophistication informs its strong linearity in outline



The result is a 3-storey, 3-bedroom house whose simplicity belies its sophistication.

One enters the home through the middle floor, which comprises a small lobby that leads either to the upper or lower level and an office at the side. The three bedrooms are located upstairs while the kitchen, living area and a small bedroom are downstairs.

"The house is designed like a wind instrument," says Yeh, who worked primarily to optimise air flow and bring the tropical humidity down naturally. To that effect, the west-facing staircase area, which consists entirely of windows, functions as an air well, pulling hot air from the rest of the house as it gets warm in the day



and channelling it out through a Windworker ventilator at the top. The front door itself is made entirely of louvres.

An indirect evaporative cooling system, coupled with a rainwater collecting system that feeds water into the cooler, allows the creation of cool, dry air to bring down the temperature in the living spaces, as well as wet air that is directed into the bedrooms' air-conditioning compressors to reduce energy usage.

In fulfilling the request for connectivity to the outdoors, the lower level boasts 28 bi-fold doors and windows, making the surrounding lawn an extension of the living area. On one side, a swimming pool runs the length of the house while an adjacent monsoon drain fortuitously provides therapeutic acoustics of cascading water in this modern tropical home.

The distinctive roof was created to incorporate energy-saving solar panels, its slant calculated to ensure maximum sunlight. Meanwhile, the stairs area is clad entirely by windows to create a chimney effect in order to pull hot air away from other parts of the house





Stiletto House's design is an interpretation of a traditional kampung house with stilts



Stiletto House

The Stiletto House is indeed an impressive sight. Apart from an arresting inverted roof with an upward slant, what is immediately intriguing is the positioning of the cluster of buildings that make up the overall design.

Taking centre stage is the green space of the 10,000 sq ft site. Typically, an average house on land of such size is huge but the combined built-up of this home is only 3,000 sq ft.

"We wanted to question Malaysian building codes that have been status quo since 1976, where instead of letting the house dominate the space, we lead with the garden instead," says Yeh.

WOOD AND STEEL: YEH CHOSE TO USE STEEL AS A DOMINANT MATERIAL AS A NOD TO IPOH'S LONG-HISTORY WITH STEEL FABRICATION IN ITS MINING INDUSTRY



The owners are a retired couple settling down in Ipoh and wanted something that reflected their slower pace of life. When Yeh was told of a potential “problem” that had to be dealt with — the owners were car collectors and needed a large space for their many vehicles — he worried that the whole place was going to become a parking lot.

But it gave him an opportunity to explore something he had always wanted to do: to create an interpretation of a Malay house. “I thought I could incorporate that and put everything up on stilts, underneath which the cars could be parked.”

Stiletto House consists of three buildings — the mother

house, a guest house of two rooms side by side and a garage located diagonally across. The arrangement is designed to frame the lawn garden like a courtyard.

Yeh’s rendition of the rumah kampung creatively breaks certain established architectural rules, especially when it comes to the materials used. For one, there is a predominant use of steel in the mother house’s exterior, a decision influenced by the availability of highly skilled local steel fabricators in Ipoh, the descendants of those who used to build tin dredges or *kapal korek* for the mining industry.

Inside, a corridor with concrete flooring creates a cool environ-

ment upon entry, before the space opens up into a large open-plan kitchen and living area. Yeh also crafted a loft one level up, complete with a sliding barn door visible from the living room — like a penthouse built for two.

A less visible highlight are the 50 solar panels on the roof that produce three times the energy used by the house on average. But perhaps the most impressive feature of Stiletto House is the panoramic view of the trees from the living and kitchen area. A lazy morning or afternoon spent on the adjoining end-to-end outdoor deck can only be described as bliss. ■

