

# LEARNING HOW TO FLY

Ar. Dr. Tan Loke Mun, is the founding Director of ArchiCentre Sdn. Bhd. The practice was formed in 1994 and has grown to become an innovator and design leader in the field of architecture. Loke Mun continues to be the key driving force for the practice that now has offices and projects around the region.

## ***Social crafting***

His interests are wide and varied just as the commissions that ArchiCentre has undertaken are equally diverse. From small alterations and additions, green houses through to new shopping retail malls, convention centres, corporate offices through to master-planning neighbourhoods, cities and townships. Whilst ArchiCentre's works are often said to be clearly recognisable, there is no clear distinctive style of expression or materiality. There is however a common thread of contextualisation, social crafting and craftsmanship in their works. The patterns of their early works were sometimes derivatives of time tested typologies often imploded or expanded for new modern day uses. A common thread throughout their work is the search for innovative expressions to enhance the sanctity of the golden rules of regionality, climate and culture. The practice seems to be driven by an almost unquenchable quest for modernity and innovative solutions for age-old needs.

## ***The art of building***

The School of Architecture at Deakin University in the 1980's was the training and feeding ground for an architecture that was buildable yet socially and environmentally responsible. A turning point came through the appreciation of the values of modern architecture that reinforced the notion that great innovations and ideas are closely related to the abilities and technologies of the age. With this enlightenment the last two years in Deakin were characterised by design adventures that stretched beyond size, scale and location. A short stint in the offices of Denton Corker Marshall left a lasting impression on the culture and workings of Melbourne's most elite and avant-garde design practice. Professor Nick Beattie who later became the head of school supervised his final dissertation. The thesis "The Princess Gate Transport Museum" won him the inaugural Vice Chancellor's Prize and also the RAIA Arthur Collins Award in 1987.

His first project as a designer upon graduation was in collaboration with the populist Geelong permaculture cooperative architect and activist Peter Lockyer on a city hotel for a Vietnamese restaurant owner client. They worked together in Lockyer's home office in the centre of Geelong City. Lunch was simply plucked from Lockyer's garden and lightly tossed over the stove. Lockyer was a living testimony to his advocacy that permaculture was the way communities could prosper whilst living in harmony with the earth.

## ***To do for one-self what one is able***

Armed with some level of skill coupled with an insane desire to pursue a more excellent built future Loke Mun pursued post graduate architectural studies in Melbourne University's School of Architecture and Building. There under the tutelage of Professor Allan Rodger and economist-planner Dennis Ingemann from the Victoria Ministry of Housing and Construction, he developed and launched the Group Self Build Housing scheme for low income families seeking home ownership. His dissertation work involved setting up a new Government enabling scheme that was based on people participation in design and construction transforming into sweat equity value. In the course of the research, he worked with John F.C and Bertha Turner who were the foremost proponents of self help enabling strategies for housing. This involvement in social housing left an indelible mark as to the basic need for shelter and the importance to do for one-self what one is able to do. Whilst developing the new program Loke Mun worked first as a

consultant and then later as the Team Leader at the Ministry of Housing and Construction's Special Housing Branch. During the same time he obtained his professional Architects registration and also obtained his Builder's License. The framework of the new housing program was also exported through technology transfer to Uruguay in the early 1990's. The development of Group Self Build Housing in Victoria earned him his doctorate in Architecture in 1992. Professor Rodger continues to be a strong ally and advisor on sustainability and green building and they teamed up again in 2008/09 to develop the GreenBuildingIndex for Malaysia.

### ***Maverick forever***

Upon returning to Malaysia in early 1992 Loke Mun worked in BEP Akitek under the late Dato' Kington Loo. Ever the maverick, Dr Tan left BEP Akitek to heed the call to move on and find his own architectural expressions. ArchiCentre Sdn. Bhd was founded in 1994 by Ar Dr Tan Loke Mun and Ar Lim Wei Hong.

Loke Mun's architecture embraces and interprets regionalism in a modern social context. In a rapidly changing world landscape, he believes that well designed buildings and spaces can create value for all its users. As such he seeks to find the balance between modern standardization and the subliminally crafted detail that can create the requisite emotional experience for his projects.

### ***Mod-Trop and more***

The early experiences with self help housing and social architecture is evident in the strong emphasis on buildability, economic realism and craftsmanship. There is no specific evident style or formulaic solution. Each commission is site and brief dependent. He has worked comfortably with the whole plethora of materials and systems. Buildability and simplicity is achieved through a good grasp of materials and available technologies. Issues of climate and locality are addressed through a keen desire to work with the land rather than to go against the laws of nature. The modernization of tried and tested typologies led to the Mod-Trop (Modern Tropical) period in his works. A successful example of this is the exclusive and highly regarded Duta Tropika (2005) housing development in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Here he took the tropical resort villa typology and translated it into modern terrace homes. A wider 26 feet frontage was used to "open up a host of planning opportunities" and the villa master bedroom with outdoor bathroom on an entire floor helped define the garden resort feel of the homes.

The Mod-Trop period culminated and is most evident in SetiaHills (2008) where the villa or pavilion concept with accompanying pool was translated into a housing development set on a hillock. Setia Hills would form the apex of his experimentation into the Mod-Trop approach and he has not returned to this period of works again.

Sizes of projects grew in tandem with growth in the size of the practice. Master planning became an integral part of his interests as he began to work on eco cities (SetiaCity, KL EcoCity, Aeropod) and eco townships (Ecolakes HCMC, Hanoi Parkcity) both in Malaysia and abroad. A fundamental key to his master planning concepts were the need to create sustainable and sufficient neighbourhoods, towns and cities. The key was to find the "sweet spot" when the three key elements of building a great environment, coupled with bringing a community to live and work there and support the businesses to prosper the place. Added to these are the importance of nodes, landmarks, paths, linkages and edges.

### ***Building a strong green foundation***

In 2008/09 Loke Mun lead the team of professional and academic volunteers under the Pertubuhan Arkitek to set up Malaysia's own green building rating tool known as the GreenBuildingIndex or GBI. The rating tool was officially launched on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2009 and has

since then changed the way cities and buildings are designed and constructed. It raised the awareness that we could no longer take the world and its resources for granted. Architecture and building had to change. Loke Mun's leadership in the development of GBI was in some sense the culmination of his belief that something drastic had to be done for the environment and the rating tool would provide the template and recipe to guide would-be developers and builders and end-users to do the right thing. When asked if the "green" movement would be just another fad or style, his response would be that it is the "right thing to do".

An underlying DNA thread through his architecture is the constant drive to innovate and experiment with the available technologies to make his buildings sustainable and stand the test of time. This can be seen in the "radiator sunscreen" that was applied to encapsulate his office in Subang Jaya (AC55) and again in his studio gallery at No.19. Increasingly his buildings have become akin to "machines for living in" as they are now required to provide more than shelter.

The multi award winning S11 House achieved GBI Platinum certification and is a testament to the opportunities available to build green. This has since been replicated in the S14 House and other commissions of private homes. The constant experiments done on these private homes eventually find their way into the larger consumer and mass market projects that the office undertakes. This has been his process of taking a theory and testing it on a lab project (usually a house) and then finding a larger mass market application for the idea.

### ***Social service and making a difference***

Loke Mun has been an active member and contributor to the Malaysian architectural profession from his early days. The late Dato' Kington Loo invited him to serve on several working committees of the Institute and this expanded to more and more areas through the years. He contributed particularly in the area of architectural education, information technology, heritage and conservation, awards and competitions. He was also the key person who introduced the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program for the profession making it the first mandatory CPD program to be implemented in the Asian region. He was also editor of the regional ARCASIA journal Architecture Asia for several years. Service to the profession culminated with the Presidency of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) from 2005 – 2007. During that time he put together and launched the highly successful PAM Convention that brought ARCHIDEX and DATUM together.

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