

/ WORDS NIZAR MUSA

IN THE DETAILS

From the natural to the historic, these two Malaysian architects share their researched approach to good design.



“Realising adaptive re-use projects with strong historical values involves a lot of research. This entails approaching local councils, and sometimes even the Public Works Department (JKR), to search for drawings and documents. If you’re lucky there will be some usable records, other times there are none.

When the latter happens, we apply a design protocol that endeavours to preserve the unique characteristics of the project. The patina of an old building, built up over years of weathering and usage, holds much value and cannot be simply recreated.

Projects such as the Granary and The Marian were new challenges to our office. The Granary was an abandoned warehouse in Sarawak – hidden behind a row of old shophouses – that was in a complete state of disrepair, and our task was to convert the crumbling structure into an F&B and events venue. The Marian, more prominently, was perched on a hill and is one of the highest points in Kuching, an old family mansion belonging to one of the richest men in town back in the day, that was later sold to the Anglican Church and became a boarding house for its members. We were tasked to convert this beautiful building into a boutique hotel.

In both projects, we found no building records. Starting from scratch, we adopted



protocol which included many processes. From a thorough examination and measuring of the existing buildings and structure, to building a comprehensive 3D model, we made a conscious approach to rehabilitate what was already there on site. We even reused existing material wherever possible and painstakingly revealed features concealed by decades of earlier renovations.

The success of the Granary and The Marian, for us, boils down to having the right sensitivity to historical value, and injecting into that context new design that is complementary. It is about having a light touch to do what is necessary, and nothing more.”

**Ng Chee Wee, Director,
IDC Architects**



“We often work with natural materials, picking things up as we go. We started off doing this on very small projects that tend to be informal. They offered room for experimentation and exploration of techniques, which helped us stay inquisitive and enquiring. Maintaining these attitudes are particularly important especially on larger methodical schemes where a strict adherence to standard practice, time and cost is necessary.

One example is the Bamboo Playhouse project, where the learning curve was steep as bamboo isn’t a material that is covered by any building code or standard practice. For example, very little was known on the best way to process fresh bamboo into a ready-for-use construction material. Extensive research was needed, and we worked with experts such as the Forest Research Institute Malaysia who did the product testing to ensure it was properly treated and dried.

Detailing bamboo was a case of trial and error, with many mock-ups produced at site before we arrived at the right solutions. This would eventualise as a framework we would apply to other materials and projects;



for the CREAM Office and Engineering Laboratory interiors, we extended the use of rubberwood beyond furniture-making to fabricate walls and ceilings. On the Buzz.ar project, the detailing experiences, aided by the engineer’s input, helped us develop an effective structural solution for the folding roof.

Each completed project became a precedent study that contributed to our database of information. Thorough and systematic archiving and cataloguing

undoubtedly takes time and effort, but in the long run makes accessing the right information easier and quicker. I think lessons learnt from past experiences are best passed on to ongoing and future projects, when team members work closely and collaboratively, where everyone is involved in one way or another on the projects undertaken.”

Eleena Jamil,
Eleena Jamil Architect