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at the HEART of her passion

Acclaimed architect Tina Lau speaks to us about her memories of design and architecture and discusses the heart of her passion for her architecture.

text by **ZOE LIEW** images Courtesy of **IDC and LYONS ARCHITECTURE**



Though she is now a senior architect and one of the directors at Kuching-based architecture firm Integrated Design Consultant, Tina Lau's first memories of design include days of flipping through architecture and design magazines from my father's collection. She reminisces, "I was around 12 years old I believe. I always loved to draw ever since I was young, even when I was in kindergarten. Strangely enough, I remember drawing objects in weird 3D perspectives, instead of still objects or animals or stuff that you would normally associate with children's drawings. Then as I grew older, I had an obsession with constantly moving the furniture in my bedroom(s) around until I was satisfied with the layout!"





Influences

Having worked on projects for Bruce Henderson Architects as well as Lyons Architecture, Tina has a great many experiences under her belt. Nevertheless, there are several key influences in her life. "One would have to be my parents, who have always instilled a solid, working mentality and ethic in my life. Especially my father, who has a strong interest in design and architecture and has always been generous in teaching and explaining how buildings work from a young age. I am in practice with my older brother who is an architect as well, who from a young age has always inspired me with his originality and good taste. My husband, who I also work with, has a unique take on the ordinary things." Tina's also greatly inspired by her travels, "I remember when I was around 18 years old my parents took my brother and me on a trip to Italy. Standing in the middle of the Pantheon in Rome, and staring at the Pieta at St Peter's Basilica really changed the way I looked at art and architecture."

Recalling several admirable figures in architecture, she speaks lovingly of the works of Alvar Aalto, Enric Miralles and the later works of Le Corbusier. She adds, "I admire the works of Albano Daminato, whom at one point I worked for at a pivotal time in my career. He has worked with Kerry Hill and Christian Liagre, and I think he is one of the most talented and funniest people I have met."



When asked to name a few buildings and structures which stand out in her memory, she seems spoiled for choice, "If I had to choose just one, it would have to be one of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Houses - Wingspread in Wisconsin, USA. It was the first time I had visited America, and Frank Lloyd Wright is one of modern architecture's great figures. It had a great impact on residential architecture, especially how rooms could be exploded to become experiential, interesting spaces that flowed throughout a building. The spaces inside the house are so well thought-out and rich in terms of material, texture and human scale. It was built in the late 1930s, so it was pretty out there in terms of interpreting what grand homes should be like, considering the constraints of society at that time."



IDC Office was renovated from a shophouse.



Melbourne Brain Centre
by Lyons Architecture.

Tina who is registered with the Malaysian Institute of Architects as well as the Architects Registration Board of Victoria has worked on a number of notable buildings. With Bruce Henderson Architects, she has worked on Jumeirah Horizon Tower in Dubai. Among some of her most memorable projects are the Melbourne Brain Centre at the Parkville campus of the University of Melbourne during her time with Lyons and with IDC, the KTS Anniversary Park & Function Hall, the interiors of a double-storey bungalow for some close friends and an extension and renovation of a double-storey detached house in Kuching.

However, instead of aspiring to design any building in particular, she aspires to the honour of designing for a figure she admires such as Nelson Mandela. Indeed, people are at the heart of her passion for architecture and design. "I love to design for people. I believe that architecture and interior design is about creating and sculpting spaces that enable the end user to live, work and play better. Our built environment plays such an important role in our well-being, and I am deeply moved and humbled every time I hear how our clients are able to use their spaces or buildings to better effect."



The Process

Tina is intensely dedicated and conscientious in every aspect of her work. Whenever she begins working on a project, she usually starts with visiting the site, or if it's a site that's interstate or overseas, she conducts as much research as is possible on its surrounding area and context. She explains in detail, "The population, the demographic, what's nearby, the vegetation, etc. I usually look for something that's distinctive about the place, for example a quirky memory or detail that is unique to the place. Then there's all the normal planning and building codes that as architects, have to be familiar with. Most importantly, it also starts from the first meeting with our clients where we culminate our design brief; by listening to their requirements, challenges or goals we are able to come up with a plan that makes their intended series of spaces workable." She concludes that ultimately, the end users of the buildings, have to be satisfied with the result. "It has to be functional but at the same time creative enough



to be unique for their particular use or lifestyle," She adds that environmental passive design skills go hand in hand with good design, and architects must allow for sufficient natural light and ventilation, even researching the hottest temperatures of the day and planning in anticipation of that.



Cafe Cafe outlet on Jalan Song in Kuching by IDC.



Highly learned, Tina took a Bachelor of Architecture (Hons) and a Bachelor of Environmental Design in the University of Western Australia. Having spent several years with Bruce Henderson Architects and Lyons Architecture, she muses that studying and working in Australia has broadened her perspective in terms of how different people from different countries use public and private spaces. “My approach to any project, be it on a public or private scale, has always been to observe how people use the space or site initially. That itself gives you clues on what would be the best approach to the site, as well as what will benefit most for the end user(s).”

When commenting on the differences between the architectural scenes in Australia and Malaysia, she says thoughtfully, “Putting aside the obvious differences such as climate and social practices, the architectural scene in Australia tends to be a lot more experimental and expressive of a certain ideology. At Lyons, I worked on tertiary buildings, where I found that the end user groups I worked with are a lot more receptive to new ideas for places of learning and teaching. As a result, there is a certain dynamism to the architecture of new tertiary buildings in Australia. In Malaysia, [we’re] starting to have this desire for public spaces that are integrated with various activities and well-connected to other parts of the city. Malaysian residential architecture already has a certain distinct character which I think makes it unique and is gaining some momentum internationally as well.”

Living in East Malaysia, Tina recognises the strengths and limitations of the technology and workmanship available and has learned to work with a more minimal, less is more approach, which she considers very humbling. Though she has yet to work in West Malaysia, the experienced architect says, “We still have quite a long way to go in terms of developing a city with better facilities, more integrated public spaces and less hierarchical buildings. In Kuching, for some time there has been an urban sprawl that has seen more

and more people leaving the city to the suburbs. As a result, the city has become less activated and the concentration of the population has spread away. However, there has been renewed interest in reviving the old, historical aspects of the city and slowly, people are starting to realise the potential of this and are coming back.”

Her Philosophy

There are a few paths the Malaysian architectural scene could take, Tina ruminates, “We should be moving towards a more integrated architecture that culminates cultures and traditions from the past, environmental sustainability and [is] inclusive of all demographics - by making all of them relevant to the time we are currently living in. Instead of trying to mimic a particular building style in another country, we should be focusing on what makes Malaysian architecture so unique by tapping into our cultural aspect for example.”

On a rather philosophical note, she explains, “Architecture has the ability to influence and contribute to the well-being of people; be it a place to live, to teach and learn, to regenerate and recover, to rehabilitate. Our built and natural environment is something we experience and live in everyday - it makes sense that it will have a direct impact on how we live, work and play.”

As we turn to what’s next for Tina and the rest of IDC, she speaks with hope and excitement about a few interesting

projects that could be realised, including an arts centre, the fulfillment of which would be an absolute dream. And more personally, she wishes to travel more often with her family and growing brood of children as well as work on more educational and public building in Malaysia.

Closing Note

With much grace, she describes what architecture means to her, “Architecture is the art of balancing ideas with creativity without sacrificing functionality, and has a direct impact on a person’s everyday well-being.” **hc.residences**

