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# Taking a tropical as well as modern approach

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**B**ounded by structured roofs, raw brick walls and wooden egg-crate louvres that offer natural light and indoor-outdoor living, the homes designed by local firm MJ Kanny Architect appear to be a synthesis of two elements — tropical and contemporary.

“The one thing that binds these together is that our design has always been from a tropical perspective. As most of our work in Malaysia focuses on creating buildings that take advantage of their tropical surroundings, it quite often leads to a built form in which the building engages with the external environment,” says the firm’s principal Melvyn Kanny in an email interview.

“We also draw references from the Malaysian tropical culture of building. However, we are always trying to find a contemporary way of interpreting a particular detail used.

“We do not subscribe to any particular design aesthetic as architecture should not be limited to a certain point of view or a particular design approach. Architecture must always evolve and we try experimenting with that in our work, which is why our work varies from project to project.”

Taiping-born Kanny received his professional training at The Bartlett in London, which he pursued on a government scholarship before returning to Malaysia (after six years) in 1993. The 53-year-old worked at a small firm prior to joining Pentago Design Group, which he left in 2003 to start his own company.

The firm has since built an extensive portfolio of projects. “MJ Kanny Architect was established as a sole proprietorship in 2003, mainly carrying out housing projects as well as private residences and resorts,” says Kanny.

“Our first project was a semi-detached development called Amansari in Puchong by SDB Group. We also worked with clients such as TA Properties, Country Heights and Perdana ParkCity on various residential projects, some of which were conceptual and others that were eventually built.

“Most of our work, however, has been private houses as we began to get more commissions for individual houses. I suppose that is how the company eventually found its niche.”

He maintains a hands-on approach when it comes to designing. “I do most of the design and project implementation myself. With individual houses, you can’t delegate the work to your architects or assistants as you are dealing directly with the client, and you are required to make decisions or solve issues on the spot. Clients can be quite demanding sometimes,” he says.

“My team of architects and assistants help me with the drawing production and obtaining of approvals from the authorities while I front most of the meetings. Our office is small (fewer than 10 people at any one time), however, we are able to manage large projects by being selective with our clients and not biting off more than we can chew.”

The firm has a mix of notable projects, including private residences such as CH House Janda Baik, Menerung House, Canopy House, Boomerang House, Falanchity House, Janda Baik Twin Villa and Kg Tunku House; commercial projects like Batu Pahat Wet World, Solitaire Suites, Sara Country Heights and Mines Waterfront; residential projects such as Teringin @ Sri Ukay, Westside III, One Central Park, Taman Zooview and Bukit



With an eye-catching façade, The Funnel House appears to float above ground and has a tunnel-like entrance



The final built-up area reached 7,800 sq ft, including the outdoor terraces and a pool



As one walks in, it opens up to a vast landscape with existing mature durian trees

Kiara Residences; and resorts like Vanavasa @ Tanarimba and Kowai Hills Resort.

## The Funnel House

A project that encapsulates the firm’s designs is private residence The Funnel House. It has received several accolades, including the PAM Silver Award in 2019. It has also been featured in magazines and Professor Robert Powell’s book, *Tropical Malaysian House 2*.

Kanny describes how the project came to fruition. “A young couple [who are both engineers] approached us to design a home for them in the gated community of Planters’ Haven. The house was to be built on a one-acre plot with a built-up of about 6,000 sq ft.

“They did not have any children. However, they requested five bedrooms and a kennel for their two dogs. The final built-up area reached 7,800 sq ft, including the outdoor terraces and a pool.”

With an eye-catching façade, The Funnel House appears to float above the ground and has a tunnel-like entrance. According to Kanny, the site was on a gentle slope, which looks unassuming from the road due to its funnel-like shape. As one walks in, it opens up to a vast landscape with existing mature durian trees. It then became the cue to the design. “The intention became one of an experience into the house from the front entry. The house was to slowly unveil itself and its vast garden,” he says.

“The idea of a tunnel that draws the occupant into the house was proposed and the house opened up like a funnel towards the garden and beyond. To enhance the opening up or unveiling further, the idea of



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the nautilus was used at the central point of the semi-circular plan layout, with the middle of the living spaces radiating out towards the kitchen and bedrooms, opening up to the outdoor terraces and lap pool, and eventually extending out into the vast one-acre site. This helped to integrate the interior spaces with each other and blend the exterior as a continuous whirling space that can be sensed but not seen.”

Kanny elaborates on the details. “Being a 1-storey house, the gently sloping site was taken advantage of. The house is elevated about 1,200mm above the ground as it slopes away from the house. This created a void below the house to keep the airflow going, much like a kampung house on stilts.

“The cool air below the house was drawn into the bedrooms and living spaces through a series of openable slots on the floor. The roof form, which mimicked the idea of the funnel slants, opens up towards the garden to further exaggerate the coming out of the tunnel, to experience the space with the

living room with its double-height space. High-level operable windows allow the cool air to be drawn in from below the floor and the heated air to be expelled out.”

Unsurprisingly, The Funnel House is embedded with green features. “The house was conceived to be green from the outset. Apart from the ventilation initiatives, 9KV solar panels were installed on the roof with battery storage, which has reduced power consumption by nearly 50%. Rainwater harvesting tanks with a pump connected to drip irrigation was used for the one-acre site. The double-brick cavity walls helped to insulate the interior,” he says.

“Finishes were kept bare, like the use of off-form concrete, unplastered brick walls and cement flooring. LED lighting and inverter AC units were also specified. The roof was split with an upper portion allowing hot air to disperse and allowing clerestory natural light to spill in.”

Meanwhile, the firm has a few projects in the pipeline. “We are currently working on a 30-room eco-resort in Janda Baik, which has just commenced construction. We are also working on an exclusive housing development based on post-colonial old-style living in Taman Sri Ukay, a tropical-style office tower off Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, and various individual houses,” says Kanny.

He talks about the challenges facing the industry. “There are numerous challenges, from dealing with the various authorities and technical agencies that are laden with red tape and unnecessary protocols to dealing with contractors to ensure that the workmanship produced by semi-skilled foreign labour can meet the standards required by clients [most of the time, clients prefer to go with the lowest bid but expect the best workmanship], as well as to make sure that the work can be completed on time for vacant possession without sacrificing workmanship quality while ensuring that our clients pay us on time.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has not affected us badly as we do niche projects and are not dependent on government projects. Apart from the two-month-plus Movement Control Order (MCO) period, when there was some revenue loss, things are back to normal now. However, in the big picture, architecture has definitely suffered due to the pandemic with the slowing down of the economy.”

There are design challenges as well, says Kanny. “I believe there is a huge pool of talent among local architects. However, not many get to express their design prowess as in Malaysia, most developments are still preoccupied with meeting the buyers’ needs, which is quite often tied back to budget and affordability. You do not get rewarded for innovation, so many get stuck in a tried and tested formula to ensure their clients’ needs are met first. So, to a certain extent, creativity is stifled.”

The firm appears to have a buoyant outlook for the industry. “The prospects are tremendous as we are still a developing nation, and architecture and design is a growing field. However, developers’ attitude needs to change from being cost-oriented to innovation- and creativity-oriented, which will bring out the best in local architecture,” Kanny says.

“Outdated building by-laws need to change with the trends and the authorities need to be more open to new ideas rather than being stuck with the mindset of rejecting applications that do not meet the boxes that need to be ticked. We still have a long way to go in that sense.”