

IN CONVERSATION



In Conversation with

Ar. Melvyn J. Kanny

Melvyn J. Kanny is an award-winning architect. Among the awards under his belt are the Asia Pacific Property Awards, PAM Commendation Awards, PAM Gold Awards, and Silver Awards. His philosophy includes designing sustainable developments within the context of the tropics and pushing the boundaries of design trends and keeping the “Malaysian identity” as a constant factor in local architecture. We get up-close-and-personal with Ar. Melvyn J Kanny on his passion for sustainability and how being ecologically sensitive to the environment can point to new directions in architecture.

1. Who or what inspired you to become an architect and tell us a bit about your company, MJ Kanny Architects?

At school I was divided between going to the science stream or the art stream. Although I enjoyed the science subject, I was passionate about learning and developing my artistic side. I finally decided to do science with art as an elective subject. I guess architects are both left and right brained. We need to be creative when it comes to solving design issues and at the same time we need to be analytical when it comes to advising clients on contractual issues

and managing projects. MJ Kanny architect is a small boutique-sized sole proprietor practice and was established in 2005. We started off doing individual houses for astute clients with rather high expectations. The many years of creating different variety of designs based on the client's needs have led to a portfolio of completed houses many of which have received recognition through the media and awards. We have of course since then taken on larger scale projects from housing developments and resorts. However, we always like to keep the projects manageable for our small office. We also prefer working with developers who have a vision more than bottom line profit who appreciate our work and want something more to offer their purchasers.

“LET’S POWER PROGRESS TOGETHER!”

IN CONVERSATION

“My skill in tropical architecture started to develop from working on various projects, especially with our tropical weather that contains torrential rain and hot humid weather.”

Ar. Melvyn J. Kanny

2. How would you describe your architectural traits? Is there any unifying theme behind your projects? What is your source of inspiration for designing a building?

One of the early offices I worked at was Pentago, which is predominantly known for its landscape and tropical resort projects, and I naturally developed an affinity for designing in the tropics, especially in how a building relates to the landscape and its surroundings. At the time people like Kerry Hill and Ernesto Bedmar were creating stunning works based on the principles of tropical architecture which were inspired by the timeless works of Geoffrey Bawa. I began developing my skills in tropical architecture and how buildings can be designed sustainably in our tropical weather with its torrential rain and hot humid weather. When you start approaching design from this premise you are able to create buildings that relate and sometimes enhance its surroundings.



Timber roof truss at the Canopy House.

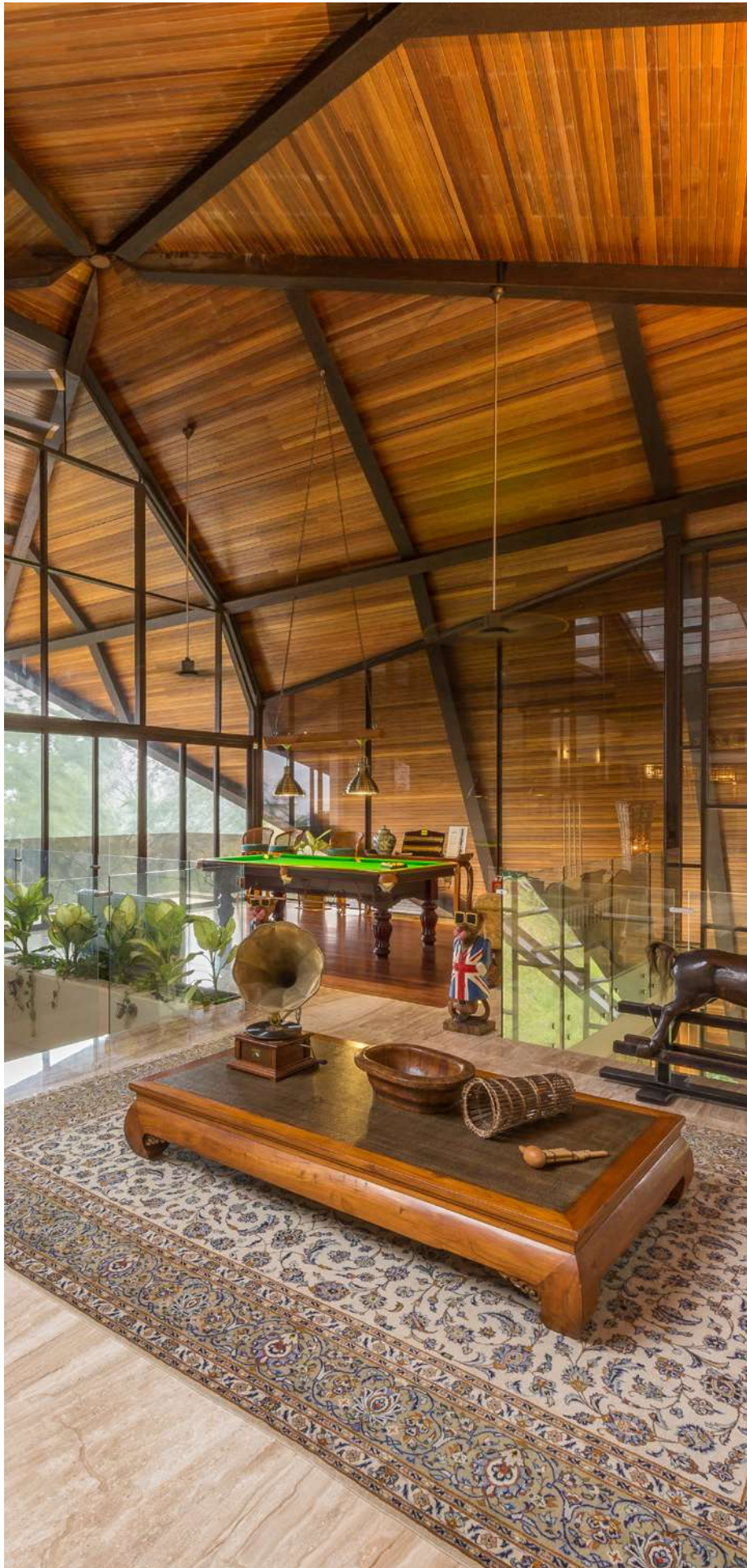
3. What kind of projects are you working on these days?

We still do individual houses but we have now moved on to take on slightly larger scale projects. We have worked on two condominiums in Desa Park City, we are now currently doing a 34- storey office building just off Jalan Yap Kwan Seng and we are doing a high-end housing project in Taman Sri Ukay. Besides that, our 30-room resort in Janda Baik is nearing completion. We love doing projects that suit our architectural philosophy rather than taking on commercial projects that can be void of a soul so to speak. If they don't spark a fire and get our creative juices flowing then they are not worth working on.



Magnificent view inside the Boomerang House.

IN CONVERSATION



The casual lounge at Falanchity House.

4. Among all your projects, which one is your favorite, and why?

If I have to choose it would be my own house that I built in 2012. It had many challenging aspects like it had to be low-cost yet it needed to house a pool, be sustainable and also experimental in the use of materials. It was one of the first few green houses that was certified by the Green Building Index (GBI) when constructed. When it was first completed people used to stop their cars to look at it, some even took photos. That's the best compliment you can get. As far as the design was concerned, it was very much a brutalist house in the sense that the entire house was mostly left unpainted with exposed concrete block walls and weathered steel trellises and paneling. Not something most people would understand or appreciate, but my family accepted the style so I guess that's all that counts.

5. If given a chance, are there any projects you would have liked being part of?

That's a difficult question! I would very much like to work with our very own well-known developers who are willing to go further than creating bread and butter type housing but who are willing to take the plunge and create homes that are truly sustainable, not just obtaining green ranking but to create homes designed to educate its users to live a sustainable life-style. Too many Malaysians are preoccupied with maintenance-free homes that do not have any trees or plants because it's a hassle to upkeep the garden. Open spaces invite the mosquitos in so they prefer closing everything with the air-condition on. We no longer have the luxury of living this lifestyle with global warming now becoming a reality. So developers need to go beyond what buyers want but what the world needs, which is too drastically change the way we live. From the urban planning aspects of creating communities rather than townships, to the micro aspect of how a house can be designed such that requires the whole family to participate in a sustainable lifestyle. Right now there are more questions than answers yet the 'elephant in the room' needs to be addressed and it will require sacrifices from all stakeholders as well as the users themselves.

IN CONVERSATION



The spectacular view of the R&A House at Country Heights Damansara.

6. Which would you consider an iconic timber structure?

I still very much love the Datai Langkawi in the way timber was used sustainably and even taken out of the trees that were felled during its construction. I understand that they still have a carpentry workshop that constantly is working on its maintenance as well as being open to visitors to create awareness of our local timber and craftsmanship. Our beautiful 'kampung' houses that were built without nails are a marvel in terms of how people understood how the material could be used sustainably and they were often built as a community project.

Today Europe and the US are leading the way in which timber can be used to create apartment towers, airports and other large structures that was not possible before Cross-Laminated Timber (CLT) and I believe we will see many new iconic buildings built this way. These projects, however, would never be approved in Malaysia due to the authorities poor understanding of structural timber and the way it behaves in fire. We need to learn and be more open to new technologies, do our own research and testing to make timber buildings a possibility in the near future. More importantly the timber needs to be from sustainable sources that are properly managed and certified.

We need to use fast growing timber that can be easily replenished when felled. Bamboo is also a great material that ticks all these boxes and creates amazing buildings due to its special property of being able to bend to virtually any shape. We should also provide more incentives for PEFC and FSC-certified timber so that in the near future it would be the norm.



Ar. Melvyn's House also known as Kampung Tunku House which used timber stripes as a part of the house design.

IN CONVERSATION

7. Please cite some of the sustainable practices that you have adopted in your projects.

We try to educate our clients in contributing to the green agenda in all our projects. That is the first challenge, to explain that every building that is constructed is actually destroying the environment and adding on to carbon footprint. Most will then feel a little guilty and be compelled to contribute in some way in creating more sustainable buildings. We usually start from a passive design point of view where we study the site, the neighbourhood, the sun-path, wind directions and how the building can be designed to take advantage of these. We like to create outdoor spaces to encourage the users to live outdoors as much as possible, hence reduce the need for air-conditioning or artificial lighting. The gardens become integrated and part of their lifestyle. We educate them on the use of sustainable materials and encourage the use of recyclable and recycled local materials where possible. We deliberately create double or triple volume spaces to encourage natural ventilation that makes air-conditioning difficult due to its large volume, thus discouraging its use. Rain-water harvesting and solar-power generation have become a norm these days and a necessity. We encourage the use of natural materials like timber that not only help enhance the interior spaces but give the occupants a sense of well-being. Timber not only has embedded carbon but also can be re-used and recycled.

8. What are the most pressing issues for architects in Malaysia when it comes to sustainable buildings?

Although today we have Green ranking systems like GBI, Green-Re etc as a guideline, architects need to go beyond ticking off boxes and calling it a day. There are many buildings with platinum ratings yet they look like they were designed for a city like New York, totally not considering our tropical weather. Using state of the art low-e glazing to reduce the incoming heat are all well and good and using energy efficient air-conditioning systems to get “greenie” points, but they do not address how buildings could be designed differently in the tropics with natural ventilation as well as local materials as much as possible. Green materials and green technology are still relatively new and need to be developed further so we can specify them in our projects. More recycling centres need to be encouraged so we can direct contractors to ensure they are sent for recycling rather than ending up in landfills.

9. In your opinion, has Malaysia’s building trends changed over the years?

Yes, certainly it has evolved over the years. Building users are becoming more discerning and the expectations are becoming higher and architects need to push the boundaries further. For example, new buildings have embraced greenery as part of its façade and floor plate in a way to compensate for the green areas we have lost. This was never needed before as there was plenty of greenery in the past. Biophilic ecological designs will become more prevalent in the near future as architecture will take on a bigger role than just building new structures.

“LET’S POWER PROGRESS TOGETHER!”

“Malaysia has green rating standards such as GBI and GreenRE as a guideline to build sustainable buildings.”

Ar. Melvyn J. Kanny

10. Who do you admire the most, a well-known figure in the architecture industry?

In my days studying at the Bartlett our emerging heroes were Fosters, Peter Cook, Zaha Hadid, Richard Rogers, etc. who were redefining architecture from a philosophical and typological point of view. These days my heroes are those who are taking the daring step to create ecologically sound buildings that expresses local ingenuity and sustainability that are relevant and unique to Malaysia and there are many architects like these that I admire.

11. What advice would you give to young architects who have just ventured into the field?

Young architects need to learn not to be afraid to get their hands dirty. They will soon realise all they learnt in university is a drop in the ocean compared to what they need to learn in practice. They need to learn very quickly construction techniques and how to integrate them with their design understanding on how a building is put together. In Malaysia, we have to deal with an unregulated building industry where virtually anyone can become a contractor. Most of our buildings are built by foreign labour and construction methods are still low-tech and quite crude. They shouldn’t be afraid to learn from contractors as they can be their best teachers. I learnt a lot from them, not architect bosses who taught me how to build or design. Nobody will do that for you, you need to take your own initiative. They will soon learn that architecture is so much more than their design thesis and it is a profession in which you are constantly learning something new.



Quadrant House at Seputeh Heights which was designed with an oriental fan shaped roof that provides shelter to the spaces below.

"LET'S POWER PROGRESS TOGETHER!"