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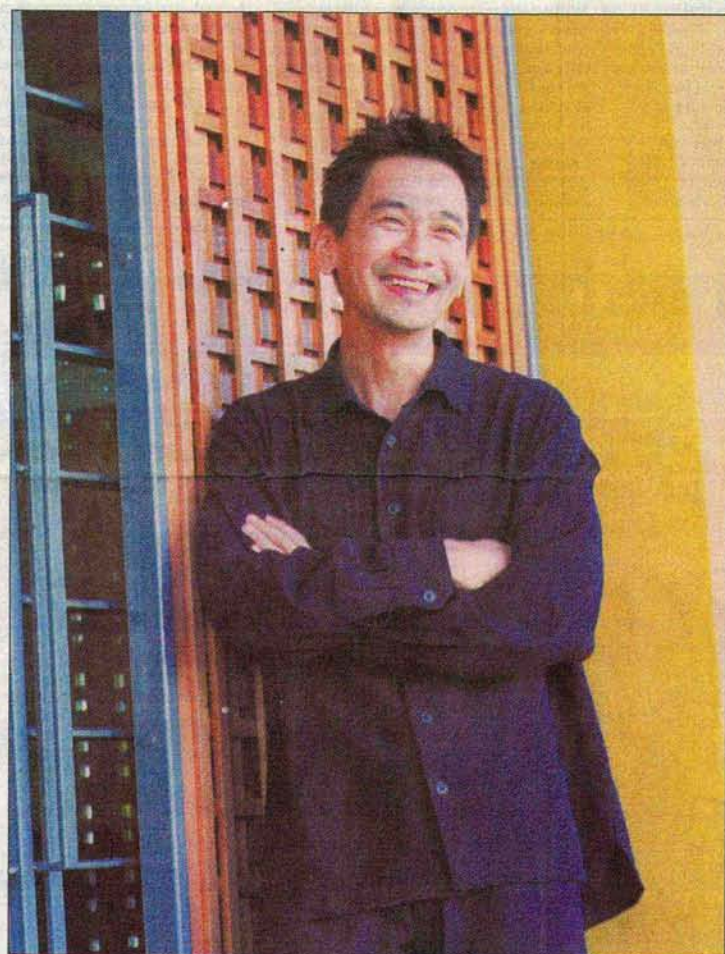
Clean lines and a feeling of lightness:

Bamboo and sail cloth were used as sunscreens in this house on Brockhampton Drive (right). The designs of 158 Emerald Hill Road (centre) and 21 Elite Park Avenue (far right) also show creative use of space to take into account ventilation and natural lighting



An ingenious play of light and space

Architect Yip Yuen Hong conveys to **PARVATHI NARAYAN** his love of simplicity



Multi-tasker: Yip thinks architects have to be 'Jacks of all trades' as they are selling an idea, not a product

CHRIS LOH

YIP Yuen Hong, a partner of the architectural firm of HYLA, Han, Yip, Lee and Associates, has a practical, down-to-earth attitude to architecture. He says somewhat iconoclastically: "There is no philosophy, just an approach. We design it, we build it."

Speaking to Yip, it feels that, essentially, architecture is all about space. A good building is the result of a sensible logical process, to create the best out of the space available. The term "style" is suggestive of changing fashions, while Yip believes that buildings should withstand the test of time in every sense.

"Temporariness has its place, but the essence (of a building) is timeless," says Yip.

HYLA itself was founded over four years ago; Yip, Han Loke Kwang and Vincent Lee had grown rather tired of working for other people and wanted to pursue their own vision. Despite early tense days, they have been lucky in developing an interesting portfolio of clients. Being young, their clients are receptive to new ways of looking at things. But it also means they have tighter budgets; it is important that their homes are cost-efficient.

"There is no such thing as cheap design; there is always a cost to pay whether it is good or bad times," says Yip, who is also a part-time instructor at the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts and the National University of Singapore. What is important is getting good value for the cost, and "controlling it to prevent wastage and excessiveness".

A case in point is a home on Brockhampton Drive where ingenious materials were used to create a low-cost yet smart, easy to maintain look. A two-metre wide double-height deck is wrapped around the side of the house using a metal frame, bamboo and sail cloth as sunscreens. This interesting intermediate zone offers shade and privacy and also softens the concrete structure. Light is diffused overall, and sneaks in through the bamboo to create lovely patterns on the unpolished floor surface.

Light, and positive-negative spaces are used creatively by Yip. Staircases, functional and necessary elements of houses such as 158 Emerald Hill Road and 21 Elite Park Avenue, are conceived with an eye for clean geometry and the impression of lightness.

Also apparent within an overall simple grid and linear format, is thought given to ventilation and air circulation; effective timber and steel detailing;

a play of light and space in the form of slats, louvers, banisters, skylights and lightwells; the use of natural earthy materials.

It's not just private homes; Yip and his partners at HYLA undertake many kinds of architectural work, from resorts, public housing, master planning of big sites, interiors and remodelling offices, to designing a Chinese temple in Changi.

Understanding the site is very important. For the Nirwana Resort Centre in Bintan the original plan was to have the building spread over a hillside. But when Yip climbed to the top of the site and "jumped up and down a little", he grins, he had a different idea. He realised that to create the resort on the top of the hill, on stilts, would afford a

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— Yip Yuen Hong

breathtaking view of the sea on all sides. The space below could be used to accommodate the shopping arcade and functional areas.

He got the contractor to build a platform that would simulate this ground floor and invited the clients up. They took one look at the view and it was a literal "wow" factor.

Architects are "Jacks of all trades," says Yip; they are selling an idea, not a product. He must understand the site, take into account the client's needs, and budget, the construction demands, structural and mechanical engineering — then come up with an idea that reflects all these elements, yet is a coherent design on its own.

Coherence. Flexibility. Space. These are the buzzwords in Yip's lexicon of good design. He believes that in a well-planned layout, you should be able to tear down the non-load bearing walls to still leave a coherent space. It is common for home owners to want to reconfigure the interiors of their house when needs change.

Communication and trust are essential components in a workable client-architect relationship. The sooner the client feels comfortable about expressing views without fear of "how it will sound", the more time and cost are

saved. Clients may also come up with ideas, say, a home along the lines of an Italian palazzo, which wouldn't work here. Yip's skill lies in discovering what exactly it was about the Italian palazzo that appealed, and whether these elements can be incorporated into a suitable design. After all, a house is to its owner what a frame is to a painting.

The recession has had an impact, but Yip says it could also be an opportunity to take stock and plan ahead. HYLA's current projects include Action Theatre's Performing Art Centre and residences like 24 Leedon Road, a Siglap property and 17 Bowmont Gardens. While business is slower, there is still work around. In a sense Yip and his partners are lucky for most of their clients are Singaporean, while the larger regional market has been badly hit.

Still, home owners now come with tighter budgets, especially for additions and alteration work. Of course, if the client has been smart about buying land or putting away money to do his home, this is a good time to build. Costs are cheaper because everyone needs work. In these times of financial worries, the smartest thing a home owner can do is to get a smart architect, says Yip mock-seriously.

He adds that prospective home owners can be savvy too. For instance, they can cut out excessive detailing, mouldings and pilasters that are fussy, expensive and don't add to the overall design. "There is such a thing as over-design," warns Yip. Another tip: Cheaper materials like slate, sandstone and terracotta can provide a luxurious feel and replace expensive finishes like marble and granite. Alternatively, expensive materials can be used as an accent in fewer spaces to greater impact.

It is better to go for simple shapes, spaces and forms. A curved wall may look flexible but actually is very rigid in terms of usage; you can do much more with a simple straight wall. Free-standing cupboards and shelving are Yip's own preference because they are easier to move around, and show off really good pieces; it is a myth that these eat up more space.

And finally the ultimate secret, the architect's own idea of the perfect home. "It's space," says the architect simply. "To design a space that is at once nothing and everything, the least possible in its expression and the most in its potential, a space that is adaptable to what will be wanted with few means."

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