

# Healing hospital design

With a trademark design, Columbia Asia Hospital — Bukit Rimau, represents a trend in the design of modern hospitals, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



**Y**OU injure your foot and will probably need to see a specialist in a medical centre. However, you're reluctant to go there. This has nothing to do with the long waiting time or the high medical fees.

You actually dread the walk from one end of the building to the other — from the doctor's clinic to the pharmacy or the payment counter. Worse, the X-ray department is on a different floor altogether. You half wonder if the architect ever considered the plight of the old and the infirm when he designed the hospital.

There are no such worries at Columbia Asia Hospital — Bukit Rimau in Shah Aiam. This hospital has been chosen to grace the dust jacket of an internationally published book by Jasmin Yu titled *Hospitals*.

Forty hospitals from around the world are featured in this compilation of sophisticated building structures and interior designs illustrating the "functional importance of such purpose-built edifices (and considering) the aesthetic criteria of the architecture".

The architect for this hospital, Environmental Design Practice managing director Chua Caik Leng, explains that designing hospitals can be complex because it involves combining technology and construction.

With Columbia Asia Hospital — Bukit Rimau, there was an additional layer of complexity: Keeping in mind the words of Rick Evans, chairman of Columbia Asia Group, "compactness works".

Despite being a specialist in hospital



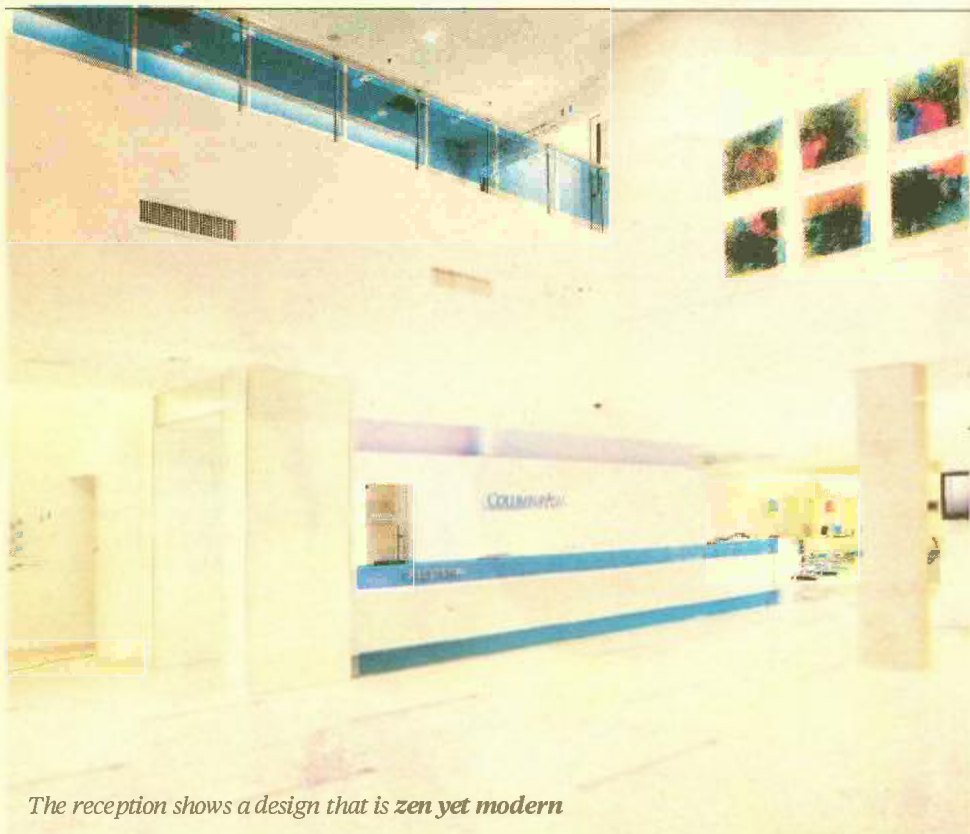
The wards allow lots of natural sunlight

designs, Chua found this to be a challenge.

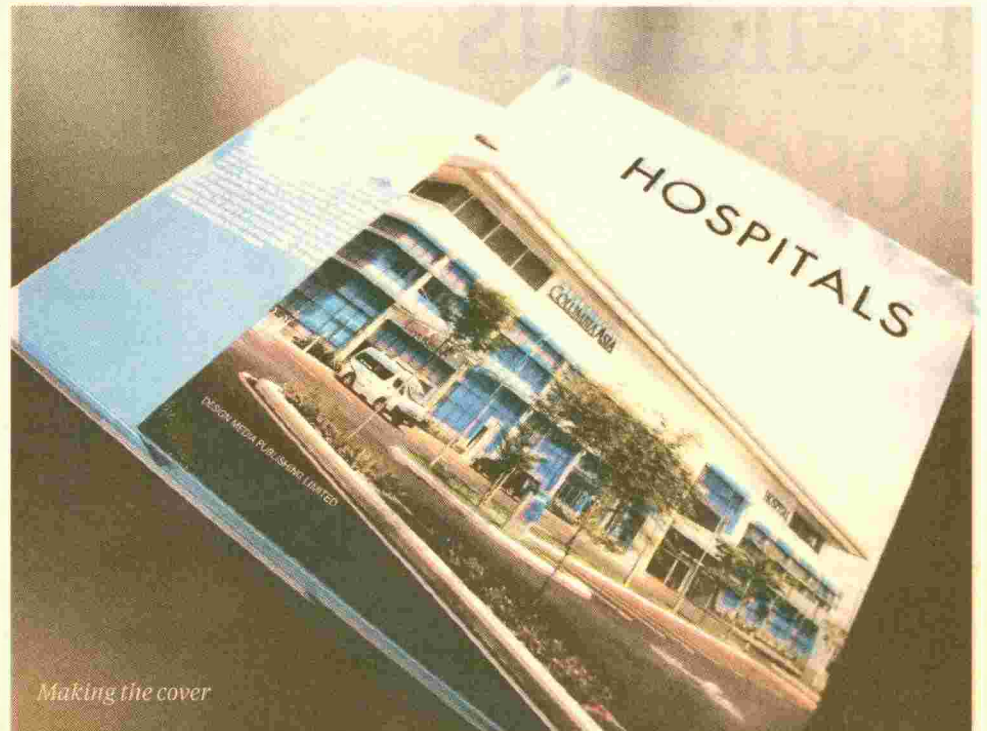
"Our design had to be different from that of other hospitals here. Most of them are vernacular or tropical and have an overhanging roof," says 49-year-old Chua.

Keeping the entire structure simple but elegant, he adds: "It's clinical, machine-like. We wanted to create a sense of precision. If you look at other hospitals, each department will have its own 'wastages' like compressor units

and these are placed next to the department. What we've done is to centralise all these on one floor, above the second floor. This is the interstitial space and no man's land. Having all these 'wastages' placed there also help in



The reception shows a design that is zen yet modern



Making the cover



'HOSPITALS' by Jasmin Yu is published by Hong Kong-based Design Media Publishing Limited. It is available at Basheer Graphic Books, BB Plaza and Amazon.com and retails at RM145.

The cheerful children's ward

insulation. This means you won't see places like a mechanical room anywhere in this hospital."

In line with being compact, there are only two floors. On the ground floor are the clinics, laboratories, treatment centres and administrative offices, and the first floor houses 81 rooms.

"All our rooms have windows so the patients can look outside," says Chua. "As you can see, the building does not have concrete walls. It has glass curtain walls."

Other than enhancing the look of the hospital, these have a specific thickness and are tinted to help control the amount of natural light transmitted into the hospital.

Chua has also taken a softer approach in designing the interior but insists that he "didn't want any arty-farty frills".

What he means is that he has a no-nonsense approach to assembling and installing things. For instance, the reception counter is made of a synthetic material and cultured marble. You will not find disjointed slabs of marble

that create grooves and sharp corners. "Just like a good suit, if it's made well and the detailing is done properly, you will not need frills to cover up the mistakes," says Chua.

Despite the colour scheme being neutral, the walls of this hospital (and all other hospitals owned by the Columbia Asia Group) are not completely bare as the hospital commissions artwork by HelenK.

"Actually, my name is Helen Kwek, but it's hard for people to say Kwek. So, I only use K," explains the bubbly 47-year-old Kwek.

Trained as an interior designer, her speciality is painting on glass. "I use a reverse painting technique. This means I paint on the back of the glass. I use specially imported paint for glass and other materials, like tempered

glass and silicone," she says. "I'm inspired by nature. I like to think of sunlight, sky, water and lines."

She explains that she uses rigorous brushstrokes and vibrant colours to capture the illusion of flowing movements in her work. She is careful not to include black or red lines in the artwork she creates for the hospitals.

"Black is negative and red is the colour of blood," she explains, adding: "I always ask, 'Who is the audience?'. Here, it's the doctors, workers, staff, patients, visitors and caretakers. They must like the paintings."

Chua interrupts at this moment and says: "Come, I want to show you something special about Kwek's paintings."



He makes his way inside one of the rooms and stands at the head of the bed. "In other hospitals, above the bed, you can see a panel with sockets for oxygen supply and so on. You won't see them here," he says.

Indeed, one of Kwek's paintings is the only object mounted on the wall above the bed. Then, Chua slides the painting to one side to reveal a panel of switches, electronic sockets and gas outlets. No doubt, this is an example of unifying aesthetics and functionality in the design of a hospital.

With a trademark design that is simple, the geometric lines of Columbia Asia Hospital — Bukit Rimau certainly represents a trend in the design of modern hospitals. The natural light that streams through the entire building adds to the positive ambience. All the care and attention to detail will only serve to benefit patients and instill in them a sense of confidence that they will find comfort and healing.

Kwek says: "We want people who come here — patients, doctors, visitors — to be happy."