

# 'Club Med' for oldies

It may still be in the concept stage but the award-winning Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community is close to becoming a reality. **Aneeta Sundararaj** talks to the creator, **Raphael Yap**

**T**HE four-bedroom apartment in the Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community is stunning. Located in the rapidly growing "Sepang Gold Coast", the master bedroom looks out into the Straits of Malacca. Use the complimentary iPad to surf the Internet or prepare your meals in a state-of-the-art kitchen.

Wait a minute. Something's amiss. This resort doesn't exist. Yet, it won the Best Retirement Development — Malaysia and Best Retirement Development — Asia Pacific Region awards at the recent 2012 International Property Awards.

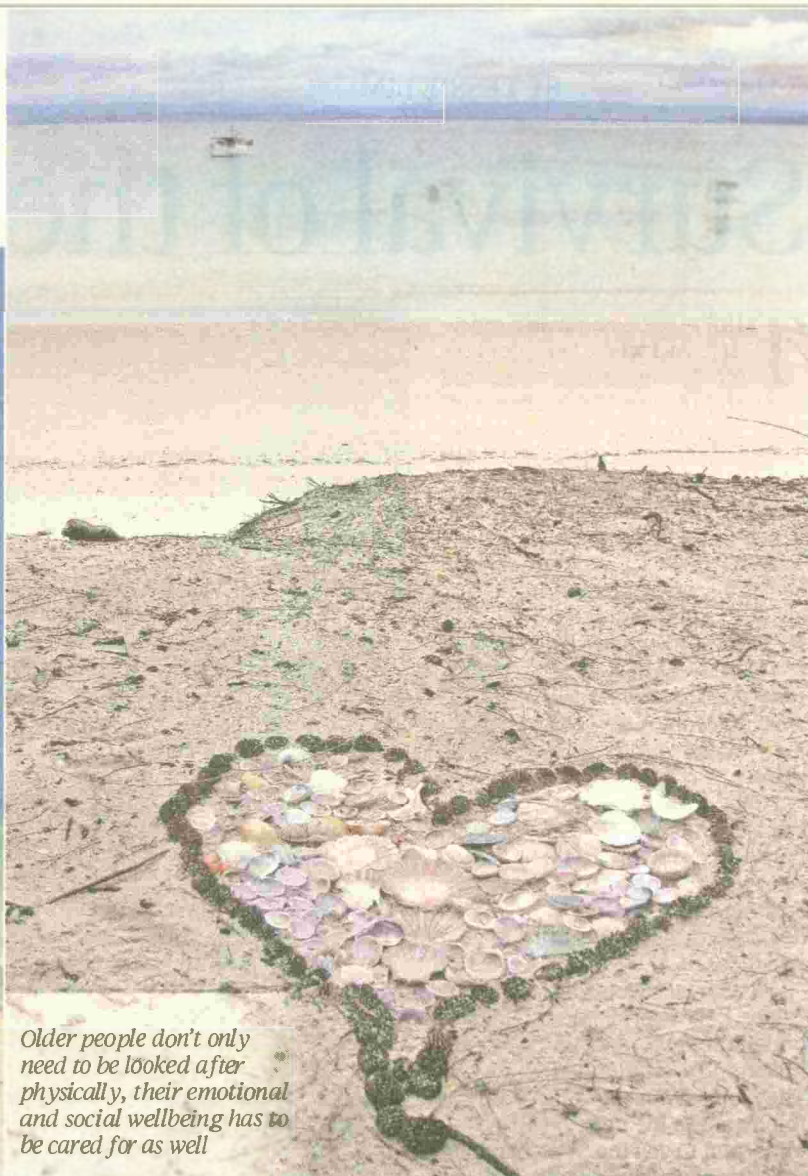
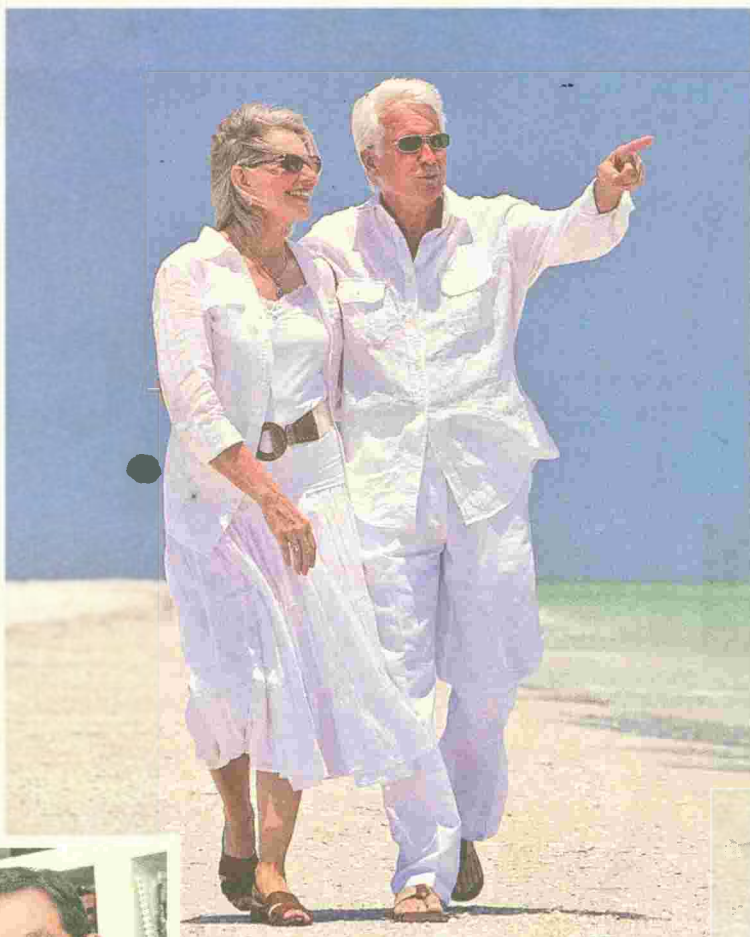
Furthermore, Raphael Yap, 68, managing director of Gracious Homes Sdn Bhd, says that in December, it will compete for the title of overall Best International Retirement Development in London.

The seed of the award-winning idea for this development was planted close to 50 years ago when Yap was in a boarding school in Australia.

During the Easter break, he found cheap accommodation in the Blue Mountains. Upon arrival, he realised that home for the holidays was an extra room in an old folk's home run by nuns who took in destitute people.

"That first night," Yap says, "after dinner, there was dead silence. It was depressing. I didn't know how we were going to last two weeks."

The next morning, a Russian lady and her daughter arrived and they rented another room. "That evening, the lady decided to do something about the silence. She saw a piano and decided to play some songs. The



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Raphael Yap, the man behind the Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community. PICTURE BY AMIRUDIN SAHIB

other residents joined in. From that day, every night, we would all gather around the piano and have fun."

When the two weeks were up, the nuns said something that stayed with Yap: in all the years of running their nursing home, they'd never seen the residents so happy. He understood then that older people didn't only need to be looked after physically, their emotional and social wellbeing had to be cared for as well.

When he completed school, Yap chose to pursue a degree in architecture. Thereafter, he was involved in careers as diverse as project management, behavioural science and property development in retail centres, hospitals and destination resorts.

When his mother suffered a stroke, he became privy to another aspect of ageing: "She was an ex-headmistress and very independent," Yap explains.

"Even though her recovery was complete, she remained frustrated and depressed."

Pausing briefly, he adds, "Then, there are people my age. They've worked all their lives and never developed a hobby. So, when they retire,

## FROM IDEA TO AWARD

IN Raphael Yap's world, all journeys begin with an idea. "But it's not just been plucked out of the air. The idea for a retirement resort was a workable one and that it was realisable."

His friends also made him aware of the genuine need for such a development when they said that what they wanted most was "peace of mind and to live a fulfilling life of own choice".

"They wanted to come back here," Yap says. Curiously, many are not keen to stay in well-established retirement villages in Australia, he adds.

"The people there are lonely. Sure, the homes will take care of you physically, but emotionally and socially, you'll be on your own. They're always talking about their 'private space'. They're expected to be independent when they're young and also when they're old."

Bearing these in mind, the concept for his development combines real-estate, hospitality and health care.

The first component is a Destination Resort. "I wanted to move away from the taboo that comes with using the word 'old folk's

home'. There's stigma attached to that and people think of it as a place where old people get exiled to and are abandoned. A resort is always a place where people love to go," Yap elaborates.

Component number two is Ageing-in-Place, which ties in with Yap's vision that the development should be a place "where you are empowered to age with grace and dignity within a supportive community".

"My friends say that when they were working, they told people what to do. Now, everyone tells them what to do. Even the maid will tell them what to eat. They had control and now they've lost it. We're also not the kind of place that will allow you to stay then call your family to take you when you need nursing care. I want those who come to us to stay until the end," explains Yap.

Finally, "to cater to the Asian mentality that we must leave something to our heirs, buying into this development," Yap says, "is a safe investment in real estate."

The core components aside, there are other little facets of this

development that make it unique. For instance, it is also visitor-friendly.

"You know how we Asians will invite family for dinner, then say, 'Why don't you stay here the night?' It's rare for children to just come for dinner then leave."

This is why even the smallest unit has two bedrooms.

The submission for the International Property Awards was made at the last minute. With such care and attention to details, coupled with maintaining the purity of the concept throughout the 10-year-planning process, it's easy to understand why Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community won the Best Retirement Development for Malaysia and the Asia Pacific Region.

Whatever the outcome of the overall competition in December, Yap is looking forward to 'realising' his idea in three years as the Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community is on the verge of being built. And Yap insists, "We're different. I don't say, 'Here. We have an apartment to sell to you.' I'm asking you to 'Come join us.'"

they don't know what to do with their time. Also, they think that retirement consists of two stages: you're either living independently or having nursing care (where they're immobile). They don't see the stage in between — where a person is not as mobile as he is but he is not bed-ridden either. This could last between 20 and 30 years. It's these people I'm looking at. I want

them to come and interact with people who have similar interests."

With a twinkle in his eyes, he says, "I've always liked Club-Med. So I'm going to build a Club-Med for Oldies."

It is not a wonder then that the Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community is the sum total of experiences, knowledge and resources that Yap

has gathered over a lifetime.

Although altruism plays a big role in what Yap is doing, this is a project that he will benefit from as well: "There isn't a place in this part of the world for me to go to. I need it myself. My friends need it. Society needs it."

It's certainly tempting.

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