

Not just bricks and cement

For a deeper appreciation of architecture, **Aneeta Sundararaj** catches up with architects Kun Lim and Jethro Koi

YOU bought a piece of land with a river running through it. That was the easy part. Now you need to find an architect who'll design a building that will fit your needs, one that's also in harmony with the environment.

Your search leads you to Kun Lim, 52, an architect who believes that his creations have done both.

He says: "You will always see a river or water-based structure in my designs. I'm influenced by the *kampung* house I grew up in that was by a river in Alor Setar. My father built that house more than 60 years ago. We had a veranda which was like a buffer zone. The kitchen was at the back, an open concept. In the middle, my father built a huge concrete water tank. It was over three metres tall and we would collect rainwater in it for everything, from watering the plants to bathing."

Kun Lim is one of the six judges for the recently launched second Malaysia Young Architect Award 2013 (www.myaa.com.my) competition organised by NS BlueScope Lysaght (a supplier of steel building components and systems). There are two categories this year: The Young Architect category for practising architects and the Student category for students pursuing an architecture degree at local education institutions.

Kun Lim is able to relate to some of the challenges the younger candidates in this competition may face. Especially their life lessons. He says: "In Dublin and later on in the US, I took part-time jobs. The biggest lesson was time management. Our time was limited and we had to do things manually. For each assignment, we were given about six weeks or so. Instead of drawing on tiny papers

first, I always drew to scale from the start. So, when I had to submit the final copy, I would copy my original design. It saved so much time."

Having journeyed far from his humble beginnings, Kun Lim counts being one of the concept master planners of Putrajaya and being the principal designer for the Kuala Lumpur Linear City among his many successes.

That said, it's not long before he returns to stories of his past. "I loved Dublin because I liked how the old and new buildings co-existed. It made me realise that when you have two or more buildings, the space in between them should also be important," he says.

IT'S HERITAGE

That appreciation of old buildings is something 28-year-old Jethro Koi Lik Wai recognises. The winner of last year's competition, Jethro says: "I studied in USM, Penang. When I was there, Georgetown was bestowed Unesco heritage listing. I'm always interested in the heritage of a building - it tells a story. So many things have happened there. Its function changes. It could have been a home where someone grew up or where a couple had their first kiss. It could have been a bakery. Sometimes, behind those shop houses, in the back lanes, there's a different settlement."

NEW AND OLD

Both men give related definitions of what an architect does. "An engineer will tell you if a beam can hold the structure up but an architect is more emotional - he'll relate with the spaces that exist in the building," says Kun Lim.

Nodding, Jethro adds: "An archi-

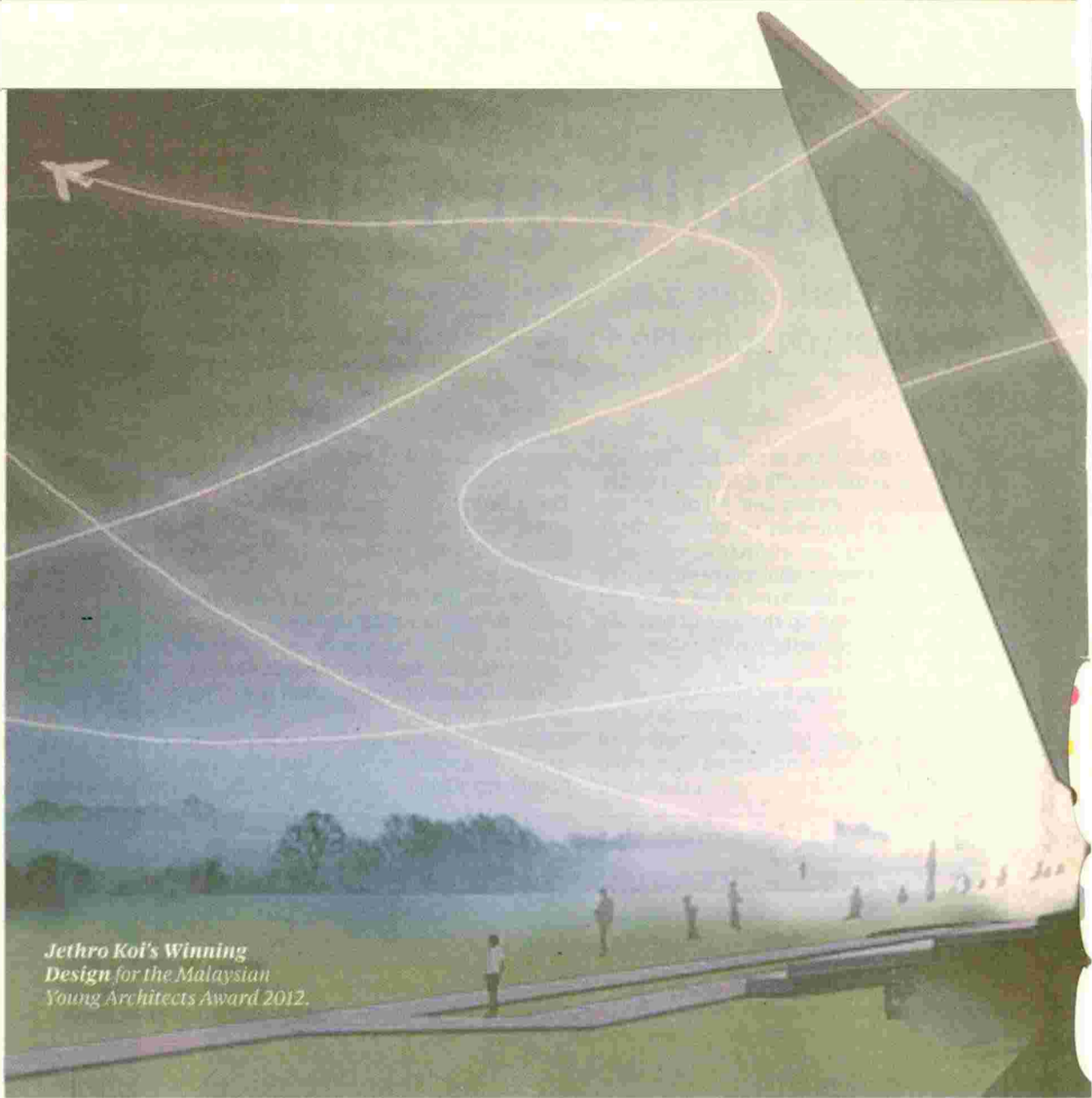
tect knows everything in the building he designs."

But this is probably where the similarities in the two men end.

A child of the modern age, Jethro creates all his designs using a computer and architecture software. "For last year's competition, we could create anything as long as steel was used as the main element. So I created an aerodrome. When my designs were ready, I submitted the JPEG files by email."

Still enormously happy about his success, Jethro says that he's invested the money he won in real estate.

Close to a generation older, Kun Lim does not use computers when making his designs. He explains: "I usually visit a site and I know that my ability is to 'communicate' with the site. The answers are all there on the site. It is important to keep in mind that the design of any building must be in this context. For instance, if you give me a 100-acre site, the



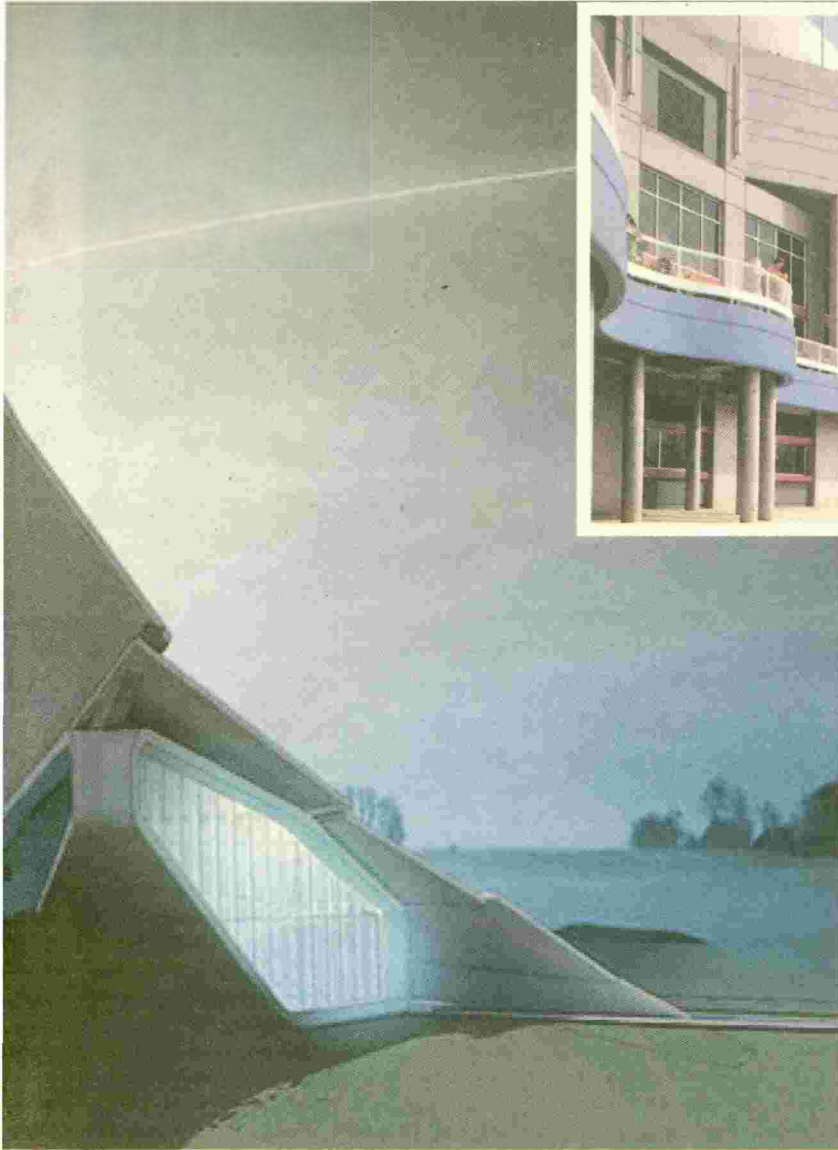
Jethro Koi's Winning Design for the Malaysian Young Architects Award 2012.



Thoman Kean New Jersey State Aquarium - Picture courtesy of Kun Lim.



Jethro Koi (left) and Kun Lim.



Thoman Kean New Jersey State Aquarium - Picture courtesy of Kun Lim.



Thoman Kean New Jersey State Aquarium - Picture courtesy of Kun Lim.

building I design may not be near the main road. I will place the building in the middle of the land and design a driveway because the journey to the building is as important as the building itself."

There's the successful project Kun Lim worked on when he was attached to the Hillier Group of Princeton: He shares: "It was in a town called Camden in New Jersey. It was the 1980s and the authorities wanted to revive the place. The popular move was to bring the city grid right to the waterfront. I didn't do this. Instead, I retained the waterfront as it was. Between the city grid and the waterfront, I introduced an aquarium and suggested that it could be a tourist

site." Today, that aquarium is called the Thomas H. Kean New Jersey State Aquarium.

SEEKING A BALANCE

While Kun Lim, a father of two teenage boys, says he had always wanted to be an architect, Jethro admits that it wasn't a career he considered until he was in Form 6.

Jethro says: "Although I was a top scorer (in Science) in Form 5, I failed in Form 6. That was when I realised that I did well in Arts subjects. I realised then that I was not stupid — I had just picked the wrong subjects. Then I saw that architecture was a balance between science and arts."

Hearing Jethro speak, Kun Lim tells us about the work he did for Master Cheng Yen from Taipei. "She told me that when we build a school, we must have a main entrance that is visible. It is important that children enter only through this gate. If there are others, they will learn that they can use other ways to do things. I also believe in this because if you are not strict, these children will grow up thinking it's OK to take short cuts."

Jethro nods in agreement and, thereby, underlying both men's belief that they've reached their individual levels of success through grit, determination and hard work. No short cuts.



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