



GROOMING: ANGEL GWEE USING DAVINES AND SHISEIDO

THE CURIOUS ARCHITECT

To be always hungry for knowledge and new experiences, and to learn from others—architect Ko Shiou Hee shares what keeps him excited about creating inventive architecture *By Luo Jingmei. Photography by Frenchscar Lim*

The typical image of the architect as prima donna is not new; in fact, the rise of “starchitects” in the noughties perpetuated it. Yet, for Singaporean architect Ko Shiou Hee, his role as a shaper and manipulator of space cannot be further than this trope. It is what has led him to collaborate several times with other top-name architects on housing cluster projects, each designing a house with an idiosyncratic design yet considering their neighbours in relation to massing, sightlines and setbacks. When approached by the clients, he could very well have hankered to design all the bungalows on the plot himself, but learning from peers is part of the process of an architect’s growth, says Ko, who co-founded K2LD Architects in 2000. The firm is based in Singapore and Melbourne, and is prolific in the region.

“With ego and pride set aside, collaboration is easy,” he says. “In fact, the hardest part of organising this type of curation as the master planner is to deal with the architects’ egos. So from day one, we looked for architects who are willing to share and succeed together as a team. With that, ideas can flow freely, and discussions can be mutually inspiring and edifying.”

The first of such collaborations saw him leading a group of five architects in 2004 for the Huafa Ecovilla project in Zhongshan, China. The second was the Lien Villa Collective at Holland Park in 2009, for which Ko rounded up five then-up-and-coming architects to each design a house on a sub-divided plot. Many of them, including Edmund Ng, who runs his eponymous firm, and Colin Seah of Ministry of Design, have become highly successful.

In 2015, he embarked on Dalvey Seven, a project undertaken by seven firms, including CSYA Architects, Aamer Architects and ipli Architects. A 120,000-square-foot site was sub-divided into seven plots, with one plot housing the family home. “We always try to have fun with the team. It’s always the casual gatherings after the official meetings that help us learn more about one another’s philosophies and approaches to design,” shares Ko.

For each of these projects, Ko designed a house. As a good neighbour, he cranked the façade of his Dalvey contribution so that residents could appreciate the view of the family house reworked by ipli Architects on the adjacent plot. His design’s openness to the



surrounding environment continues the exploration of what Ko has come to be known for, which, for a lack of a better term, can be labelled as “modern tropical architecture”. This manifests in the manifold ways he experiments with form and elements to respond to the equatorial climate and landscaping. A consistent idea applied to some projects is the pinwheel form, which augments engagements with the surroundings.

In each project, Ko also pursues the immaterial. “I always believe that great architecture invokes a spiritual response. Louis Kahn once said: ‘A great building must begin with the immeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end, must be immeasurable,’” says Ko, who shares that he has experienced such metaphysical encounters in buildings such as Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum and Salk Institute, Le Corbusier’s La Tourette and Tadao Ando’s Church of the Light.

In fact, light is an important element in creating such atmospheres. The house on Coronation Road West was one of his projects that investigated this assiduously. “Every single detail—where the light comes in, and the texture of materials and how they play with the light—was carefully crafted to achieve a kind of serenity,” he elaborates.

MODERN TROPICAL ARCHITECTURE

Ko’s tropically attuned direction was developed over time. In fact, his original influence came from his education in modernist architecture and theory rather than regional precepts. “Starting out as a modernist architect, I was more concerned with the clarity of form and concept rather than natural monsoon architecture with large overhanging roofs and vernacular design, which I thought was too fussy,” he shares. “But having lived [with this climate]



From top: K2LD Architects partnered Kengo Kuma & Associates for the design of the Founders’ Memorial; Ko Shiu Hee, one of K2LD Architects’ founding directors. **Opposite page:** Highlights of Ko’s “modern tropical architecture” include The Oritsuru House (pictured left) and the Winged House

since I came back from the US and Japan, I recall all the romanticism and poetry associated with the monsoon rain from my childhood memory. I started to get sensitised again to the nuances and began to design with new interpretation in response to our tropical monsoon condition.”

A good example is the Winged House, which Ko says was a result of a “deconstruction-reconstruction” methodology influenced by his time working at Los Angeles architecture studio Morphosis. Here, he dissected the traditional elements of the Minangkabau roof while using the ventilated roof to expel heat and humidity. The Oritsuru House is a second iteration, whose form was derived partially from Japanese origami, and a third version is now being developed.

Another form of collaboration comes from working with other renowned architects, such as Kengo Kuma, Neri&Hu, Rodolfo Dordoni and Christian Liaigre, to name a few, to realise their designs in Singapore. For such projects, Ko’s role is to ensure the purity of the design architects’ ideas in execution. One such important project is the Founders’ Memorial, currently being built to honour pioneering Singapore leaders. Designed by Kengo Kuma & Associates in collaboration with K2LD Architects—the winner in an international competition for the memorial’s architectural design—the low-lying structure with an undulating green roof faces Gardens by the Bay across a body of water and appears to grow out of the ground. Having worked on several projects in the past 10 years, the two firms have great chemistry. Shares Ko: “They are a great team to work with; always creative and extremely sensitive in their design approach. It has been a great collaborative experience as we share our expertise.”

Along his journey, both as student and architect, Ko has gleaned much from mentors. He lists several,

such as the late professor emerita Elinor Evans of Rice University, who inspired him to look deep into the senses in design; graphic designer Nobuhiro Yamaguchi, who opened his eyes to the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi; and fashion designer Issey Miyake, who first fascinated him when he was a student.

“Miyake wrote, ‘One should always be curious—not a passive curiosity dependent upon information received, but an aggressive curiosity that compels one to seek things out and ascertain them for oneself.’ This has been a guiding ethos in my worldview,” says Ko. It is why his portfolio never replicates project designs and why he is into collaborations—to which Ko offers another of Miyake’s quotes: “My creation is never complete until the wearer wears it.” These words were spoken personally to him when he met Miyake in Tokyo in 2002, where the two shared a soba meal.

Curiosity is what Ko encourages his students—he also lectures at universities—to develop. “I think students need to be curious. Otherwise, why go to school? School teaches students to find answers and solutions to problems. The practice of architecture is not just about making beautiful buildings. There are so many aspects to this profession that I never run out of topics to teach,” he expounds.

Ko himself is a lifelong student, dabbling in ceramics, road trips to faraway places to be inspired in the flesh, and wine drinking to study the geo-climate of various terroirs, among other fascinations. “People ask me if I would retire one day. It’s a strange question to me,” he muses. “Perhaps someday in the future, I may no longer run my practice, but I’ll never retire as a designer. As a designer, one should always be curious and the moment the curiosity is gone, you die with it. That is the ultimate retirement.”