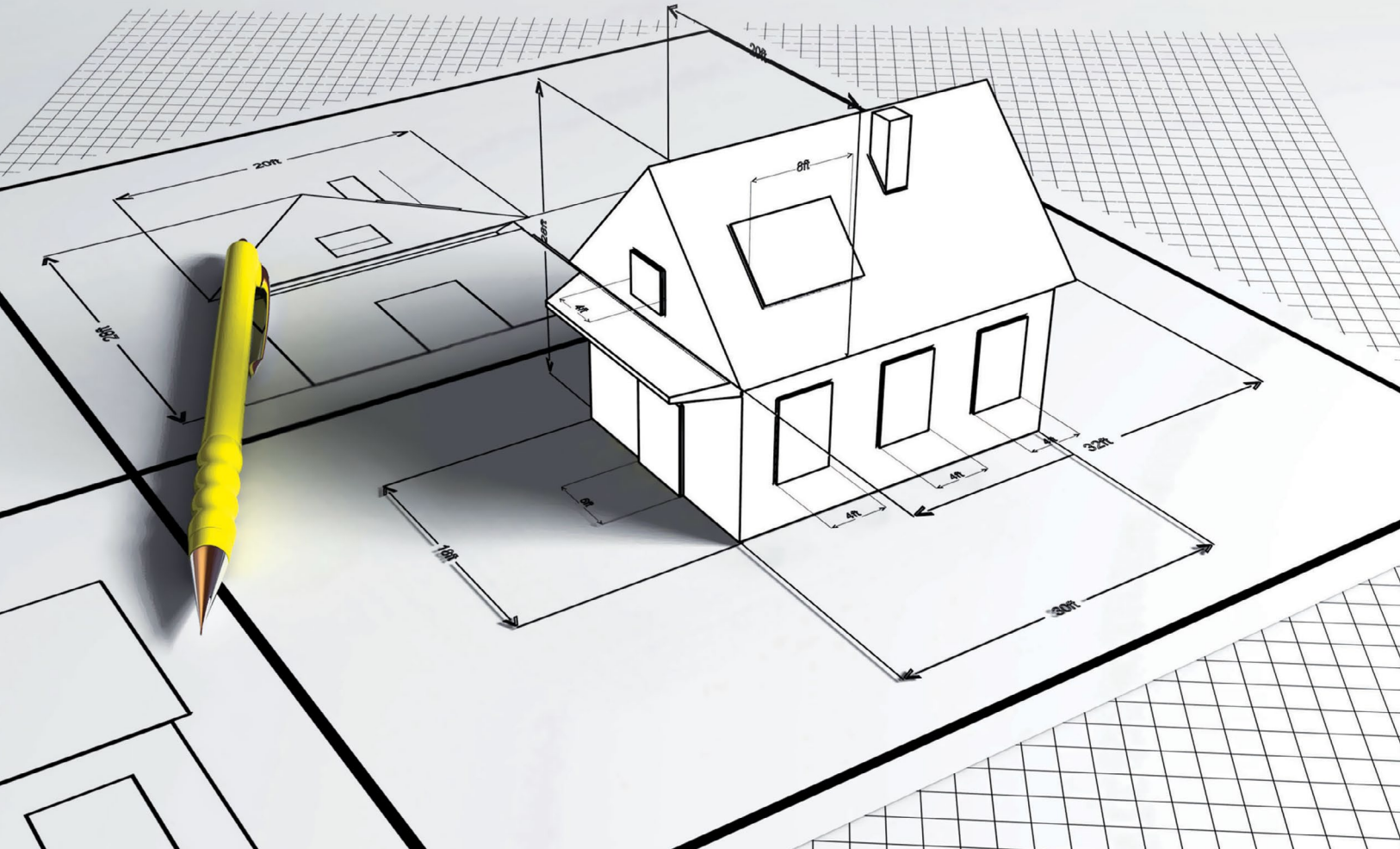


# SME

## ARCHITECTING SUCCESS 5 ARCHITECTS TELL US THEIR SECRETS!



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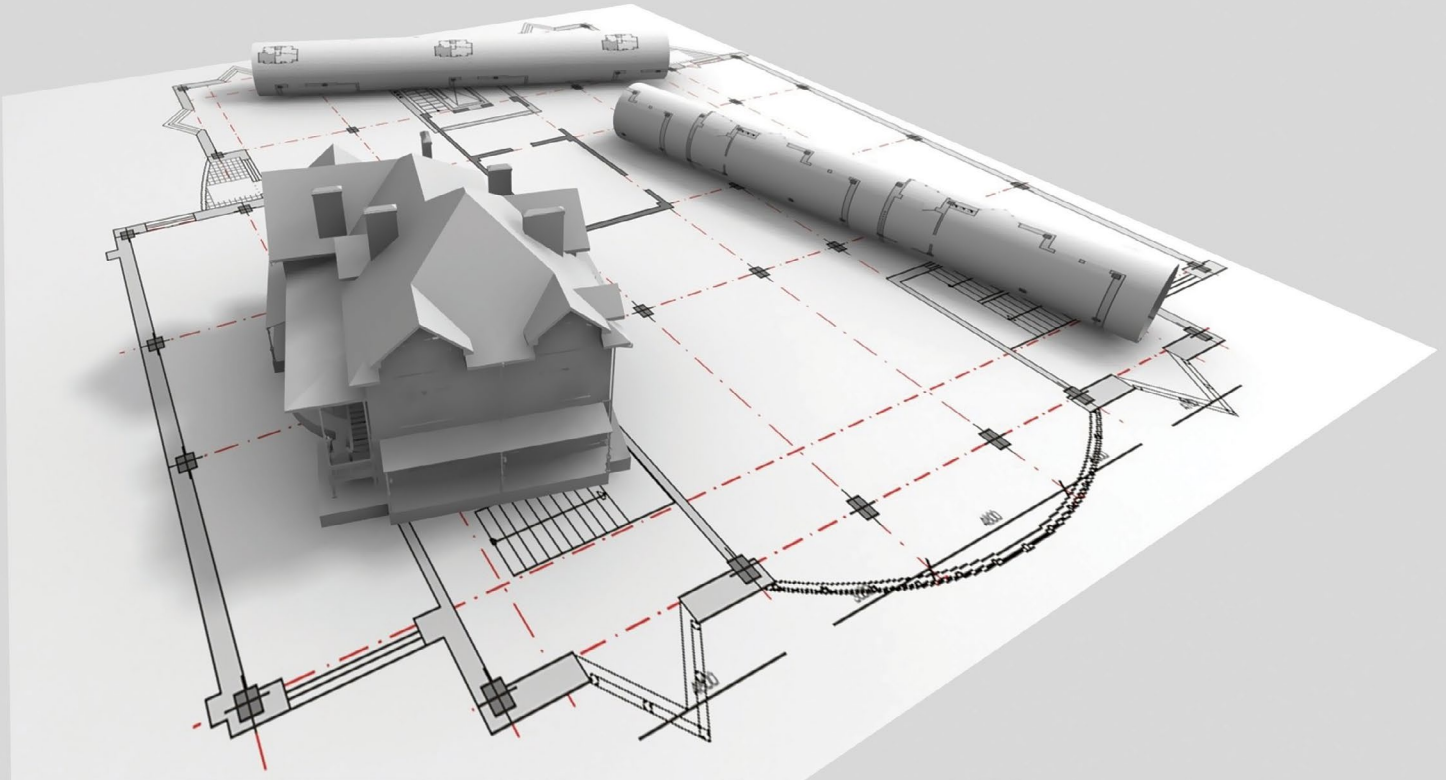
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# ARCHITECTING SUCCESS



By Gloria Gomes

**T**he mythical grandeur of Solomon's golden Temple; the celestial tomb pyramids of ancient Egypt; the symbols of eternal love embedded in the white marble walls of the Taj Mahal; the labyrinthine Modernism of La Sagrada Familia Basilica; and the emblem of modernity reaching for the skies, Burj Khalifa, all reflect the grand ability and desire of Man to create as his Maker. Ever since Man discovered the mason within him, he left the darkness of the caves to build himself a future.

Architects have done more than design and construct buildings and structures. Their unique ability to integrate art, culture and ideology with form and structure has not only shaped civilizations but has proven to be the impetus to progress. There exists a fine line between architecture, construction and interior designing. Though similar in its core concepts and often overlapping, each of them can be defined and practiced as a discipline on their own. In architecture, even the simplest structure is a creative manipulation of technology and materials. From planning, designing and constructing, an expert architect knows how to play with space and ambiance, light and shadow to present a practical, environmental and aesthetic creation.

In a race for development and modernity, nations within the Southeast Asian region have undertaken ambitious building and infrastructure plans, escalating the demand for architects.

The April to June 2015 Hays Quarterly Report revealed that architects with the ability to manage projects from concept to construction, as well as the ability to document throughout the process, are highly sought after. In addition rapid urbanization, growing populations and increasing environmental concerns are some of the new challenges that architects also need to consider today. So what defines a grand architect? SME Magazine set out to discover and unveil the star monuments of success in and around the region.

**LAYING THE FOUNDATION** *"Architecture is not based on concrete and steel and the elements of the soil. It's based on wonder."* Reflecting on these words by Daniel Libeskind, is it the sense of wonder that attracts people to this field? Believing in the power to transform the banal into something poetic and the everyday into something sublime, Colin Seah, the founder of Ministry Of Design (MOD), possesses the brilliance to mold philosophy with art. The outcome is a creation of experiences following his approach of 'Essentialism', the redefining and distilling of elements of Place, Ritual and Perception. A multi award winner, termed by the Monocle

Singapore Survey 2010 as a "Rising Star in Architecture" and making the list of Hong Kong Perspective's '40 under 40 architects', Colin describes his seeds of inspiration for design to be as 'essential to a meaningful life...the antithesis to chance and chaos.' Explaining his passion he says, "When I design, I find my inspiration and purpose from the work of the Ultimate Designer."

"Architecture is a multidisciplinary profession that [we] find is very stimulating. Everyday contains a dose of creativity, a dollop of pragmatism, and a healthy hand of multitasking and problem solving!" describe the founders of Atelier TT, Jan Steven Tjandra and Lisa Teo. Following a holistic approach to architecture including interior designing, furniture designing, landscaping and planning, this power duo strive to bring innovative and fresh solutions to projects. With projects sited across Southeast Asia, Atelier TT has spread its wings to soar high in the architectural realm.

For some the option to follow this path comes as a natural choice, an innate passion. Co-founder of EHKA Studio with his better half, Hsu Hsia Pin shares, "You could say architecture runs in my family, my father is an Architect so I chose to follow him since it looked like a pretty cool profession when I was a young man." Garnering experience from award winning companies this husband and wife team, Hsia Pin and Eunice Khoo have set their goals on architectural success as winners of the 5 Star Award Best Leisure Interior (Malaysia) at the Asia Pacific Property Awards 2014.

"One of the key influences has been the development of my interest and skill in the arts. My parents gave me access to discover the wonders of art from the age of 6, and I have since acquired the love of sketching, drawing and painting from an inspiring local artist for 12 years. This early interest and exposure to the arts became critical in my eventual attraction to architecture, which evolved into a natural calling as I discovered that through architecture, my passion for the arts and beauty can be channeled to seek knowledge, and bring meaning and purpose through design," shares Seah Chee Huang, director of DP Architects (DPA), one of the lead architects for the Singapore Sports Hub and Tampines Town Hub projects.

A 'Green' Superhero in his own right, termed as "one of the 50 people who could save the planet", the widely celebrated Dato' Dr. Ken Yeang is the recipient of numerous architectural accolades. Profoundly inspirational and an exemplar of following one's dreams, Ken Yeang recounts, "My father was a medical doctor but I did not wish to follow in his footsteps. I was interested in art and so I eventually agreed with my parents that I study architecture."

The foundation for any structure, either shallow or deep, of rock or soil mechanics, determines the strength of what is to be built. Often our cultural roots and background play a vital role in molding and influencing our principles and ideals. They are the underlying elements that strengthen and shape our life's decisions and become our life's philosophy. On this, Ken Yeang shares, "Once I started my architectural studies, I really enjoyed it. It was a field I could achieve some measure of success. My architectural school, the AA (Architectural Association) School in London had at that time a 'laissez-faire' approach to teaching with an air of anarchy, being the zeitgeist prevalent during those years of student revolution in the early 60's. This became a key part of my philosophy the idea of choice and freedom."

For Hsia Pin, intriguingly it was music that spun the web for architecture. "I was trained in classical guitar when I was a child and the principles of classical music subtly shaped my approach to design. Classical musicians focus on perfecting their technique of playing, executing pieces with skill, balance, emotion, control. Nuances make a difference and the goal was music that is pleasurable. Architecture design for me became an extension of this. Space should bring pleasure to the user," he explains.

"It was not a conscious conditioning in our respective backgrounds, but perhaps traveling and being exposed to different cultures and cities when we were both young helped shaped our exposure to different ways of living, cityscapes and architec-

tural styles, to be aware that context, the end-user and economics all play an important part in our urban fabric and thus, Atelier TT's design process and philosophy," share Tjandra and Teo.

**KEEPING AN EDGE** Nearly every artist or designer is entitled to their own signature style which is reflective of their ideologies and is embedded in their work. "It's more of an ethos...to always question convention, to disturb and to redefine. This ethos continues to guide us but only as a framework...how we continue to "question" convention and to "disturb" the status quo needs itself to be constantly questioned and evolved, especially as the team grows to tackle an array of diverse projects which often come with higher complexity. Each one of our projects is anchored by a single "essential" question, which is unique to the particular project and is derived from an analysis of the distinct issues surrounding the project," describes Colin Seah.

Sharing how he discovered his signature style, Ken Yeang recounts, "After my architectural schooling, I went to work as a research worker at Cambridge University in the UK on a SRC (Science Research Council) funded project to build the 'autonomous house', being a project mooted by the US inventor and visionary Buckminster Fuller. After several months into the project, I concluded that the research was more about engineering and the true agenda should be about designing for a sustainable and resilient future, whereupon I sought leave to become instead a Research Student to do research and a doctorate on the theoretical aspects of ecological design and planning. Upon completion, the topic became my life's agenda."

It is not necessary for all architects to follow a particular design style. Chee Huang says, "Personally, I do not prescribe to any specific design palette to distinguish myself from others as an end in mind. I am however always interested in developing a set of design processes to generate provocative architectural solutions that challenge the conventional psyche of users. Often, together with my team, we begin with deep interrogation of the true purpose of an architectural project, and through intensive research, deliberation and development, we always attempt to seek refreshing ways of how the architecture can be a confluence of various urban, social and natural landscapes that are purposefully sculpted by the project's specific context and conditions."

"As a company, we don't intentionally try to distinguish ourselves, although people have commented they see a certain style in our works. I think this is unavoidable for designers who design true to themselves. We really enjoy the sense of lightness and nature, so in our works you will see use a lot of white color and light woods and other elements that contribute to this sense of lightness," shares Hsia Pin.

**CONCRETE AND FISSURES** Like individuals every organization has their own strengths and weaknesses, their opportunities and challenges translating into what makes them concrete and what causes fissures. Speaking on this, Ken Yeang says, "My strongest asset is 'focus', being the belief that one cannot be everything to everybody and that one can focus on at the few things and do these absolutely extremely well. Focus is accompanied by persistence and an optimistic belief in the art of the possible. The biggest challenge is to persuade clients that going for the cheapest and the fastest is not always the best way to go. I also believe that architecture has the immense power to transform human lives and to make people happy, to give pleasure in their environment."

On challenges Chee Huang shares, "One of the biggest challenges in this industry is the practice of architecture in a global society with a highly distorted value system. With cities

and architecture being increasingly perceived as commodities, architects are subjected to design under the pressure of commercialized parameters of efficiency, branding and lifestyle marketing, over response to context and richness in the social and communal experience. Primarily, many architects today who speak about their design agendas have little to share on socially based cores in their designs. In the course of our architectural pursuit, the key solution is to stay focused and create meaningful works and social experience while balancing economic and commercial viability."

Colin Seah describes his concrete being his home Singapore, "I believe the core principles of Design are constant, but the outworking of these principles belongs to an ever evolving continuum, always changing, never static. For example, I'm someone who needs a balance between the familiar and the unknown. Tipped one way or the other, I end up either utterly bored or overly exhausted. Since my work is almost always about forging new ground or grappling with new creative challenges, the familiarity of Singapore keeps me in check and grounded: the stability of family & church community, favorites, haunts and cuisine. Singapore to me is home and a home base, a safe haven, from which to discover and redefine the world around me."

**THE GREEN TAPESTRY** As the world spins towards modernity, greater attention is being paid to its effect on the environment. As a result more organizations have taken up the role of corporate citizens, implementing steps to secure a more sustainable and greener future. "The concept of sustainability in architectural design is one of necessity and not by choice. All responsible architects and architecture must embody key green design principles as part of their design DNA, not for the sake of jumping on trends or to seek accreditation or certification. Green design principles should be ones that are derived from a holistic understanding and response to the given context including geographical, socio-political, economic, cultural and climatic factors," expresses Chee Huang.

On following the green initiative Hsia Pin says, "We like the idea of "green" but if we get too focused on green design, we can unintentionally prioritize the environment over people. We instead strive for our designs to obtain the maximum benefit for human living while being as efficient in using scarce resources as possible. For example, air conditioning can be blamed for the destroying ozone layer, but some people can't sleep or work without air conditioning. We would rather design a higher energy consuming building with great spaces for people to live work and play in, than a low energy building with uninspiring depressing and uncomfortable spaces. Of course the low energy building with great spaces will be the best."

"Harnessing nature within the principles of planning is not new, however, with new technology and material technology, ideas of sustainable design can be further accelerated. However, in Asia, this term of sustainability tends to be surface application that is mandated by the government," adds Tjandra and Teo.

Hearing from the Master of Green Design himself, Ken Yeang shares, "The cause of the current environmental impairment is the lack of biointegration between everything that humans build, make and do on the environment with its natural systems. If we are able to achieve this biointegration in a seamless and benign way with nature, then we will not have any environmental problems at all. Here then is the challenge for all designers, to achieve this by design."

**WABI – SABI** Revolving around the Japanese aesthetic, 'Wabi-Sabi' is centered on the notions of impermanence and imperfection; as individuals we are able to find these elements in every aspect of our lives. Finding the wisdom in natural

simplicity and acknowledging the 'flawed beauty' of life hold the profound truth to living life itself. The depths of these two simple words are limitless yet it can be applied to the simplicity of our hopes and the impermanence of our fears for our present and the future.

Colin Seah shares his take on hopes and fears of the architectural industry: "What has changed for the better is the pervasiveness of design appreciation and diversity amongst the design community as well as Singaporeans/Malaysians at large. There are many more expressions and definitions of "good" design these days; a decade ago, tastes and preferences were more conventional and narrowly defined - much of what was deemed good was imported. Also, it's heartening to see Singaporeans/Malaysians become more discerning and appreciative of the value of design."

"What haven't changed," he added, "are perhaps traces of an enduring underlying sense of insecurity that the design community (consumers, creators as well as clients) still shares in believing that foreign design are better than local. That may be true in many cases, but it's not always true. I think the distinction of foreign vs. local is unhelpful and should be replaced with a simpler but more critical "meritocracy" model. It's far more encouraging and nurturing an environment, with more patronage, appreciation and culture than 10 years ago. We've come a long way. Of the different disciplines however, architecture is probably where more leaps of faith can be taken; land prices and the semi permanence of a building all contribute to higher risk aversion. That's one reason we work abroad for our larger projects."

Ken Yeang sharing his concerns says, "My greatest fear is not being able to achieve my life's agenda in the many aspects of ecological design (theoretically, technically, interpretatively, aesthetically, etc.) within my lifetime. My local concern is the premature liberalization of the architectural profession by the Government in Malaysia (and elsewhere in Asia) before the local community is ready for it."

Revealing some of his hopes and fears, Hsia Pin shares, "I hope that as the profession gets more and more responsibilities and liabilities, we architects continue to dare to think differently and push for great design. Hopefully, we won't simply comply with all the parameters set by the building authorities, the developers/clients, the engineers and the contractors, and fail to press through and find new and better solutions. If we do, then Architects will become the followers, and lose the mandate to bring positive change."

**BRICKS OF WISDOM** For those interested in pursuing this field, Tjandra and Teo share some sound lighthearted advice: "Have fun in school, it's a discipline that not only cultivates creativity, but it also broadens the mind and enriches one's awareness in many facets of life, be it understanding historical and technological advances which have shaped our urban fabric (such as the invention of the elevator and steel structure that kick started the skyscraper boom). Be selective with the firms you apply to in order to get as much practical experience you can at work and try to have a work life balance!"

"Don't forget that architects design buildings for people, not for themselves. In designing, ask yourself: If you are the client, would you want this design? If the answer is no, then the design is not there yet," cautions Hsia Pin.

"The best advice given to me is that in whatever I seek to do, I must do it exceptionally well and do it to the best of our abilities, or else do not do it at all. There is no halfway. We need to be committed and be devoted to our craft, which we must seek to master followed by continuous improvement," adds Ken Yeang.

**FINISHING TOUCH** Architecture is both an art and

technicality. They are artists of structure, form, material and design. It is what one would consider as creative engineering, of how best to utilize space, resources and time to build and elevate ones environment. To be considered as a grand architect one must master in all, from visualizing concepts to structuring it into a reality and ultimately build monuments that stand the test of time and to be marveled at by future generations. For as long as Man exists on this planet, there will always be architects.

# DIRECTORS OF DESIGN

## COLIN SEAH Founder of Ministry Of Design



**T**wo-time recipient of Singapore's highest design accolade, the President's Design Award, and entitled the Designer of the Year by International Design Awards USA 2010, MOD's founder and director, Colin Seah, is an eminent figure in the architectural world. Trained in the U.S and licensed in Singapore, his profound

architectural sensibilities of fusing art and design with philosophy has won him several awards and accolades; a two-time Grand Prize Winner of the highest international hospitality accolade, the Golden Key Award, and Marcus Corporation Foundation Prize 2007 'emerging architect with potential for greatness.' Colin Seah is a 'starchitect' who has already risen to great heights having been invited by the Singapore Tourism Board to transform Singapore with his architectural brilliance into a top destination for 2020.

## JAN STEVEN TJANDRA & LISA TEO Founders of Atelier TT



**S**tarting out as an experimental studio in 2008, Atelier TT has evolved into an international studio that embraces the holistic nature of architecture including interior and furniture designing, landscaping, and planning, led by its copiously talented masters of design, Jan Steven Tjandra and Lisa Teo. Accumulating immense knowledge and experience from

home and abroad, this powerful duo creates designs tailored to the uniqueness of each project through meticulous research, detailed technical knowledge and keen artistic judgment. With an aim to rethink and fashion innovative and exciting new environments, Atelier TT has an impressive portfolio comprising several projects from hospitality to residential and commercial; expanding its creative wings from Jakarta and Singapore across Southeast Asia.

## KEN YEANG Cofounder of T.R.Hamzah & Yeang Sdn.Bhd.



**R**ecognized, admired and awarded, home and worldwide, Dato' Dr. Ken Yeang needs little introduction. An early pioneer of ecologybased green design and master-planning, he has been named by the Guardian as "one of the 50 people who could save the planet". His doctoral dissertation, "A Theoretical Framework for Incorporating Ecological

Considerations in the Design and Planning of the Built Environment" earned him a PhD in ecological design and planning from Cambridge University. It is published as 'Designing With Nature' (McGrawHill, 1995) and in Spanish as "Proyectar Con La Naturaleza" (Gustavo Gili, SA, 1999). He received an honorary Litt.D. from Sheffield University (2004), and an honorary PhD from University of Malaya (2013).

## HSU HSIA PIN Cofounder of EHKA Studio



**H**usband and wife dyad, Hsia Pin and Eunice, having garnered design and project experience of 16 years altogether, from renowned award winning companies, set out to establish their very own EHKA Studio in Singapore in 2011. Following his father's footsteps to become an architect, Hsia Pin along with Eunice graduated with a Masters

in Architecture degree from the National University of Singapore. Their experience has led them to become one of the leading architectural firms, having won the 5 Star Award Best Leisure Interior (Malaysia) at the Asia Pacific Property Awards 2014 for their impressive project The Brew Orchestra.

## SEAH CHEE HUANG Director at DP Architects



**H**aving worked at Foster and Partners in the UK, Seah Chee Huang is a director at DP Architects (DPA) and one of the lead architects for the Singapore Sports Hub and Tampines Town Hub projects. His keen interest in exploring how architecture can be purposefully designed to engage minds, touch hearts and inspire lives, has led him to be the first vice president

for the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA) and one of the key designers of the Singapore Pavilion for the 2005 Sao Paulo Architecture Biennale. As a recipient of top honors such as the SIA, Board of Architects (BOA) medals and book prize for his outstanding academic performance, Seah Chee Huang has set himself as a top architect in the industry.