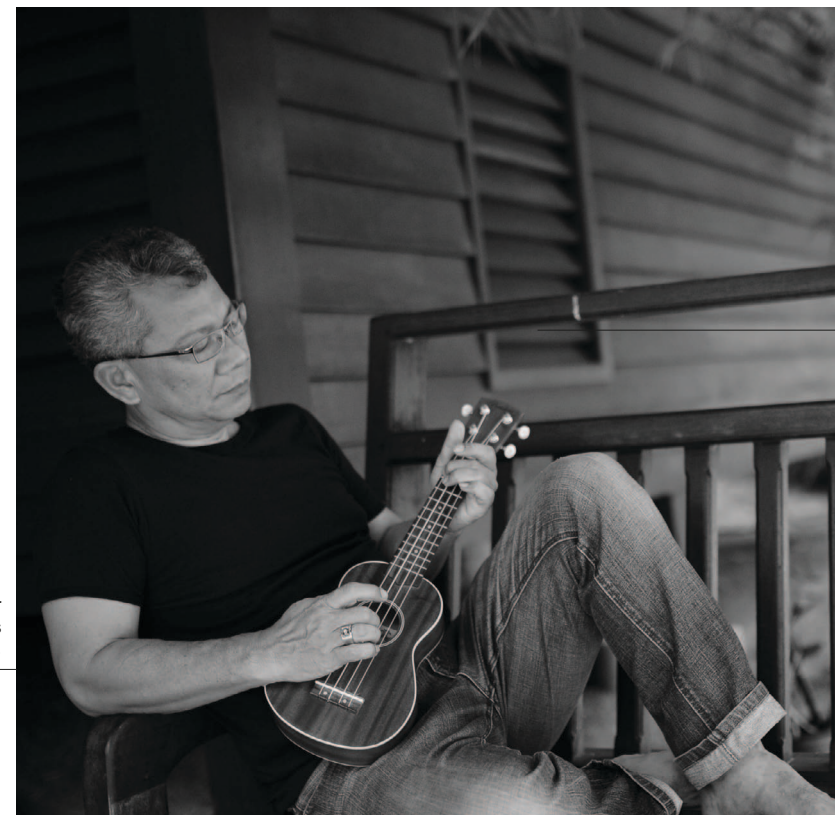


LET WOOD BE WOOD

Malaysian architect Azman Md Nor is a huge fan of wood. He is quietly championing this material in his country, but the lack of skilled craftsmen and quality timber, he says, is hindering progress.

The curved wall structure is "one of the most interesting design elements of the house, providing structural stability that speaks volumes of what could be done with timber," according to the jury of the Malaysian Wood Awards.

Azman Md Nor designs with wood and has his own practice, Arkitek Azman Zainal.



Timber is experiencing a renaissance in Southeast Asia as local architects return to their roots, drawing inspiration from the traditional kampong houses of their youth. Or at least, this is what Azman Md Nor feels is driving the timber revolution in the region.

The 55-year-old architect and part-time lecturer grew up in such an environment—a kampong (or village in Malay) in Port Dickson where most household items such as toys and furniture were made from wood.

"We used wood to make whatever we needed, even the chicken coop. It's convenient and easy to work with," Azman says. At Deakin University where he read architecture, he was inspired by the late Professor Kevin Borland who took the class to visit the timber houses he designed, further fanning the flames for wood appreciation. However, it was only in 2006 that the father of four began actively pursuing projects in timber at his own practice, Arkitek Azman Zainal.

Wood for window frames and grilles are common in tropical homes



Azman's style can be described as avant-garde, bold and unique, a "like it or hate it" kind of vibe. He personally feels it is humanistic, raw and natural, drawing richly from local culture.

"Using wood for the interior is like bringing in all the attributes of the forest into the hearth. Wood has many health benefits," he says, confirming several studies that a wood-clad interior calms the nerves and reduces stress levels.



Anjung Kelana by Mr Azman. The project bagged second prize at the inaugural Malaysian Wood Awards in 2017.

This philosophy is evident in Anjung Kelana, the home and office he built for himself. The building brings out the honesty and raw beauty of timber, and for that, bagged second prize at the inaugural Malaysian Wood Awards last year. According to the jury, the curved wall structure is “one of the most interesting design elements of the house, providing structural stability that speaks volumes of what could be done with timber.”

“Let wood be wood,” he says.

Like many of his peers, Azman agrees that wood is easy to work with: It can be carved or crafted using light handheld tools; it generates minimal waste as the off-cuts, wood chips and sawdust can be fashioned into other products; damage can be easily repaired; old timber works can be reclaimed and recycled for other purposes.

However, external applications of wood pose a great challenge in Asia’s tropical climate. The material must battle oxidation due to prolonged exposure to the sun’s ultraviolet rays. In a couple of years, it will weather into a silvery grey colour which is not a structural problem but can be an aesthetic concern for some.

The wooden building in the tropics must be well-ventilated to preserve the timber. “Those who appreciate timber and want to use it are mainly worried about decay, termites, affordability and maintenance. But these can be easily addressed. For example, decay occurs because of dampness which can be due to poor detailing, poor ventilation and maintenance,” Azman advises.

Having a well-lit and airy indoor space also improves occupants’ well-being, he adds.

OBSTACLES IN THE WAY

However, there is still a long way to go before wood becomes a choice material in design and architecture.

In Malaysia the industry struggles with labour shortage. Dependence on a transient population of foreign workers means few can be trained or retained as skilled craftsmen. It is also increasingly

difficult to have designs built well due to the lack of quality timber supply—one of the biggest barriers to building a timber construction culture.

Azman stresses that timber delivered to the construction site should be ready, meaning that it should not be deformed, green or juvenile. Yet over the years, people have lost confidence in timber because “we don’t know what kind of quality we are getting at the construction site. Subjecting it to testing at the last minute is disruptive to the construction schedule.”

Other obstacles include low awareness and poor perception of timber’s structural strength—a myth perpetuated by poor timber quality at the work site.

CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Most architects want to see their designs come to fruition but in reality, Azman remarks, this is often hindered by changes and volatile temperaments “pulling you in all sorts of directions.”

He says, “You have approvals that come in so late that by then, the project has lost its feasibility.

“Then you also have impatient clients who want to get the design to the ground even though it is incomplete. This puts a lot of pressure on us.”

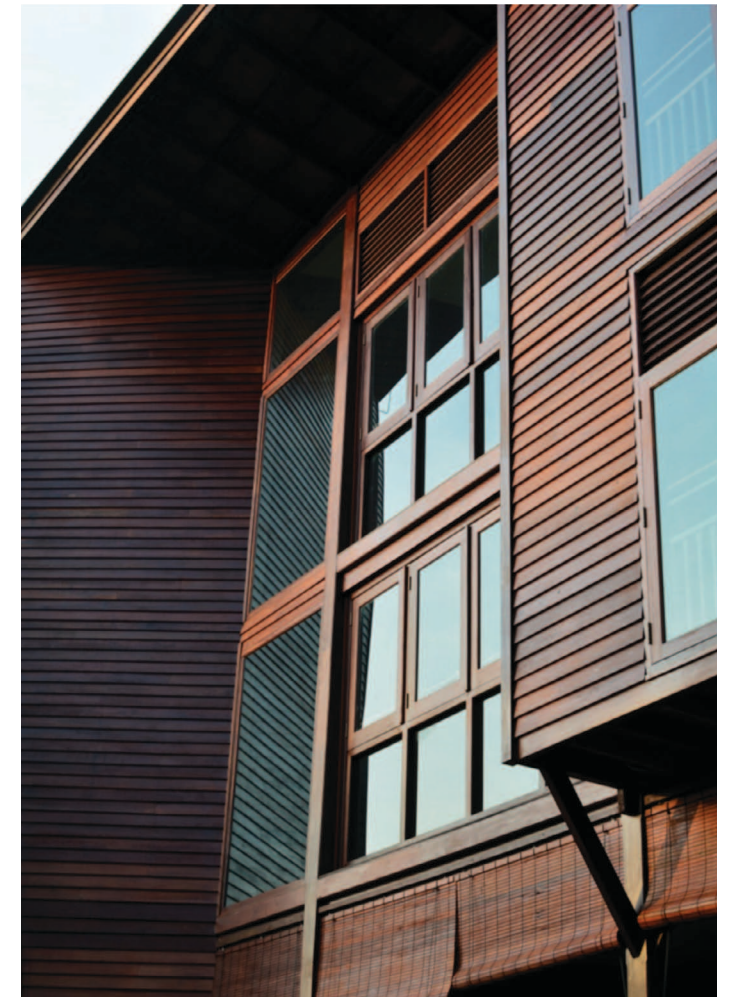
In the past 20 years, government authorities have also been fond of the design-and-build approach, estranging the architect and his design team away from the end user, Azman adds. Clients sometimes employ project managers, adding an unnecessary layer to the building procurement system which makes it increasingly challenging for the architect to communicate values that the end-user actually wants or needs.

But at the root of the practice, architecture is about creative problem solving, Azman says. “We can organise ourselves so that we have more control of our intellectual property. I am now looking at a designer-maker approach and see where this path leads to.”

Also, if the timber supply chain can provide quality timber and be backed up by a systematic delivery system, the design and building sector can be more confident in coming up with bold, quality and innovative designs.

Finally, the industry must stop perceiving timber as a commodity: Drop the consumerist behaviour, stop and enjoy the material, and experience the design.

This will perhaps give Malaysian timber research and design its long overdue recognition in the international arena of wood architecture. @



Over time, wood will weather into a silvery grey, which can be an aesthetic concern for some.

“Drop the consumerist behaviour, stop and enjoy the material, and experience the design.”