



Wong: The City of Elmina is the first themed development in Malaysia that embraces the concept of "wellness" and "liveable city"

Designing urban identities

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BY **WONG MEI KAY**

Design consultant William Harald-Wong has certainly carved out a unique position for himself in the property development sector.

As the principal of William Harald-Wong & Associates Sdn Bhd and founder and chairman of The Design Alliance Asia (Singapore and Hong Kong), he has been working closely with master planners, architects, landscape architects and property developers to enhance the human and cultural aspects of places.

"I usually introduce myself as an urban identity designer, a self-coined title, for want of a better term. My work complements that of architects and is an intrinsic part of green architecture and environments," he says in an email interview with *City & Country*.

He adds that from young, he had developed an interest in the relationship between man and the environment.

Current projects

Wong is currently working with a team of experts from diverse fields on Sime Darby Property Bhd's 5,000-acre City of Elmina project, located along the Guthrie Corridor Expressway (GCE) in Selangor.

"It is a game-changer, an extraordinary initiative that uses design to transform the way we live," he says, adding that Elmina is the first themed development in Malaysia that embraces the concept of "wellness" and "liveable city" in a holistic manner.

The development is accessible by several highways such as the GCE, Shah Alam-Batu Arang Highway, New Klang Valley Expressway, Kuala Lumpur-Kuala Selangor Expressway and the proposed Damansara-Shah Alam Highway.

Elmina is being developed in line with the Mercer's Quality of Living Survey, which measures "liveability". The developer aims to combine eight elements of wellness — social, family, physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, occupational and environmental — in the township.

The project features a 300-acre parkland, which is an extension of a 2,700-acre forest reserve. This parkland will be the



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foundation for other amenities and facilities. In addition, a dedicated 70km bicycle track and a marked marathon (42km) jogging or walking track will be built.

At the heart of the township is the wellness cluster, a specially designed one-stop centre for complementary, curative, rehabilitative and preventive healthcare. Another attraction is the wellness-oriented retail area featuring fitness centres, organic food shops, health spas, alternative medicine providers and so on.

Wong believes that his previous involvement in township developments such as UEM Land Bhd's East Ledang in Nusajaya, Johor, has prepared him well for the challenges of the mammoth Elmina project.

"I came up with the overall concept and initial details of the 31 mood gardens, which became the selling point of East Ledang, a premium residential development," he says.

He adds that at East Ledang, a family can experience a different garden every day for a whole month, all within walking distance from their home. The concept was worked out in detail by Punt Garden Sdn Bhd.

Wong was also involved in the 425-acre integrated marina, resort and casino project in Hai Phong City, Vietnam.

Named Cat Ba Amatina, this was the only development allowed on Cat Ba Island, a Un-

esco World Biosphere Reserve, and located at the gateway to the famous Ha Long Bay.

He was also part of the team that came up with the eco-friendly and sustainability positioning for SP Setia Bhd. They created ECO-eco, a pair of talkative tree mascots, to help SP Setia raise awareness of sustainability among its staff and the people.

Upcoming projects

Wong says his company has just started work on a wayfinding, signage and environmental design project at East Gate Business Park in Damman, Saudi Arabia. He is also working on the Lusail Waterfront project in Qatar.

Wayfinding encompasses the ways in which people and animals orient themselves in physical space and move from place to place.

"East Gate Business Park is a prestigious development that will be marketed to top-tier multinational corporations," he says, adding that the Middle East projects offered him a totally new perspective on "greening".

He cites the Lusail Waterfront project as an example — it has a projected motor vehicle carbon footprint of 1.71 tonnes of carbon dioxide per day, or 624.15 tonnes per year.

To offset this, the developer has been given several options, including pledging funds for reforestation in Kenya, supporting verified carbon reduction projects around the world (where fossil fuels will be replaced with renewable energy generation) and funding clean development mechanism projects.

"The Saudi developer having to 'pay' for its carbon footprint is just an example of the new thinking on sustainability," he says, adding that this is an interesting move that positions Saudi Arabia as a world citizen that contributes to greening the world.

He hopes Malaysian developers will adopt this mentality to help boost the country's sustainability efforts — perhaps by having corporate social responsibility activities to build their brands.

Future trends

Wong believes that three key design trends

are emerging. "Cities and neighbourhoods will become greener, smarter and more inclusive."

First among them is the "urban nature" movement. According to him, this new thinking blurs the distinction between urban and rural elements. "We will progress from rooftop gardens to rooftop farms."

He says city folk may one day seek to escape from the hustle and bustle by not only retreating to the countryside but also entering the urban nature city.

The second trend is the reuse of space. As cities grow denser and land becomes scarce, designers will explore new uses for space in the most uninspiring areas such as that under elevated highways, he says.

Another upcoming trend is spatial proximity. According to him, with a highly mobile workforce and a dense environment, people from different cultural backgrounds will work in increasingly close and constant contact.

He believes that an "identity" or "sense of place" is essential for an urban environment. "People should feel that some part of the environment belongs to them ... where they are able to express themselves freely."

He says people around the world want to care for and be responsible for — either individually or collectively — their cultures and lifestyles.

So, does he have any signature style that he can incorporate into his projects? "No, I don't have a signature style. I strive, through research, to create a unique character for each development," he says.

Wong believes that the constant changing of urban identity designs is essentially a result of the collaboration between many creative minds, including designers and clients.

In addition to architects, he says, artists, designers, craft makers, poets and culturists can work together to create beautiful, liveable projects. "You can see the result of this collaboration at Publika [in Solaris Dutamas, KL], a project we worked on three years ago. It's time we built beautiful and inspiring communities and spaces."