

Room

DESIGN • INTERIORS • ARCHITECTURE

1960s MALAYSIA
IDEAL HOME REDUX

• Dr Tan Loke Man's forte

THE NATURAL

• Architect Chris Wong

CRYSTAL CHARGE

• Barovier&Toso, Baccarat & Swarovski dazzle

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DEPTH OF DETAILS

I remember the first time I saw Damai Suria. It was over a summer holiday back from university. Being driven through the leafy U Thant area, my line of sight was drawn by a low rise complex of apartments which was nearing completion. Being used to the grimness of urban English architecture, it was like finding an ice cold bottle of Alpine water after languishing in the Gobi. I recall the pale mint of the sunscreen louvres that lured me into peeking into the interiors of the units. I admired the simple yet elegant lines of the architecture and thought how out of place it looked. It was too chic, too cool. It belonged in some hipster commune in the waterfronts of Miami, not downtown KL. I was smitten.

Even now, after over a decade and the growing sophistication of the KL architectural palette, Damai Suria remains one of my favourite residential developments in KL. I had the pleasure to finally meet the architect behind this project, Chris Wong. He seemed amused at my enthusiastic impression of his first project in Malaysia. Since Damai Suria, Chris' portfolio had grown diverse but I was heartened to find that each and every one of his projects still bears his love for detail - a love that takes many forms.

Chris is a keen underwater photographer and he enthusiastically shared his collection of macro shots when we met. They were unsurprisingly stunning and full of rich detail. Not above waiting an hour to get each shot, his attention for the minutiae carries over in all aspects of his life. Perhaps Charles Eames put it best: "The details are details. They make the product. The connections, the connections, the connections, they will in the end be these details that give the product its life." **R**

THE NATURAL

CHRIS WONG
OF C'ARCH
ARCHITECTURE
+ DESIGN IS
AS QUIETLY
ASSURED AS
HIS PORTFOLIO
THAT INCLUDES
LUXURY CITY
CONDOMINIUMS
AND
SUSTAINABLE
FOREST
RESORTS

Architecture is a profession that nurtures big ideas, grand gestures and, often, some rather healthy egos. Perhaps it takes a type A personality to get your buildings built just the way you dreamed it, but it's always refreshing to meet an architect who has the big idea, who finesses the grand gesture without the attendant ego. C'arch Architecture + Design's principal, Chris Wong is one such architect. The brains behind the award-winning Damai Suria luxury condominiums, which was considered ahead of its time more than a decade ago, Chris has been assiduously building a portfolio of quietly elegant projects for almost 20 years.

Entering the C-Arch office in Ara Damansara, one is struck by how wide open the space is. The tinted glass walls appear to rise up all the way to the top of the three floors with a floating metal staircase anchoring its centre. The first floor is a hive of activity and there doesn't seem to be a hierarchy in work spaces. Chris seems to have a corner rather than an office and one gets a sense that it is more of an atelier, filled with prototype ventilation blocks, artworks, Taschen books and architectural drawings – it is a humming workshop for ideas.

Rather refreshingly, Chris remains a traditionalist, designing his projects by putting pencil on paper rather than using computer programmes. A man who still values time-honoured methods, he admitted that he had wanted to be an architect since his childhood days, drawing and messing with parquet building blocks. But like a dutiful son, he did a year of engineering school at the university because his father suggested that it is a better profession. But he switched course after a year, completing his bachelor of architecture in 1984 at the University of Houston. He stayed on in the US to work for Skidmore Owings and Merrill for a year before going to the University of Cambridge to do his graduate diploma in architecture in 1987.

He speaks glowingly about his time in Cambridge where he studied under the legendary Dalibor Veseley and Peter Carl. "These professors instilled a lot of the values in my work. I still make it a point to look up Dalibor when I'm in London," he says. Before heading home to Kuala Lumpur in 1991, Chris did an internship in London with Eric Parry.

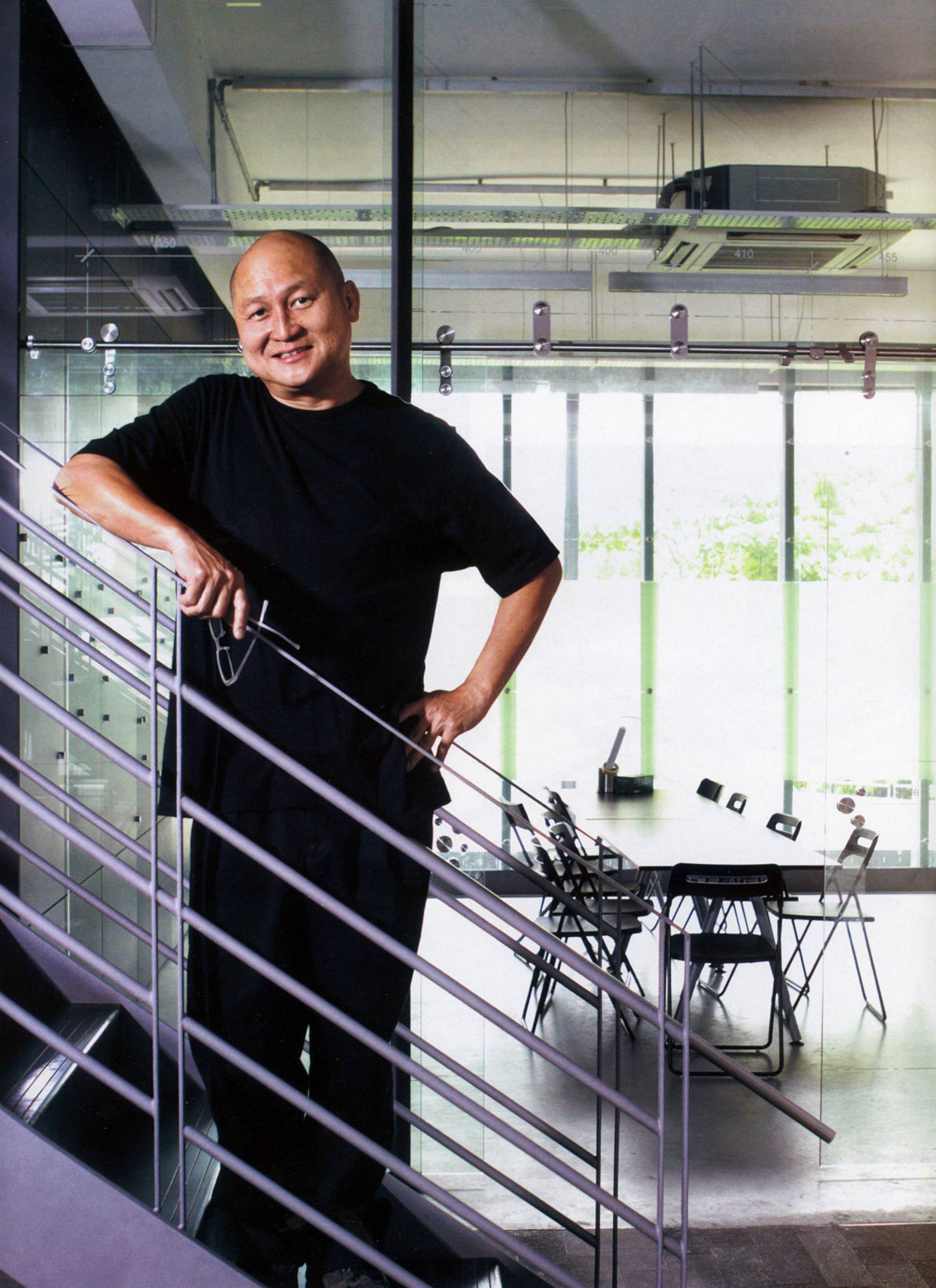
"Eric taught me in Cambridge and he is an architect for whom I have immense respect. We have completed some projects together in Malaysia and I have always appreciated and enjoyed the juxtaposition in thoughts and the process of making architecture. The concept of dialogue is very important in the practice as discourse represents the metaphoric millimetres of architectural orchestration," he explains.

This love for details was tested in his first big project, Damai Suria. "Underlying the work is a wonderful story about the clients and their ambitions and us being completely and utterly without any experience in KL," he reminisces. "My client's father very poignantly told us that we are young and we can learn but he also told us that he would not set foot in the building if it is not up to expectations." Fortunately for Chris, he learned fast and has since completed a second building for them.

A cursory look at Chris's projects show an amazing range spanning the sleekness of Damai Suria to the more rustic Sri Damai Boutique Hotel at the Clearwater Sanctuary. Chris confides that he doesn't have a preference but enjoys the contrast. "These differences are almost schizophrenic but they respond to different needs. Perhaps this is where we discover our platform by not making formalism the pertinent objective; perhaps the discourses across vastly varied scenarios are all relevant to many schemes," he expounds.

Turning 52 this year, Chris is very much at the top of his game. He has the luxury of being selective in his projects but he doesn't seem content to rest on any laurels.

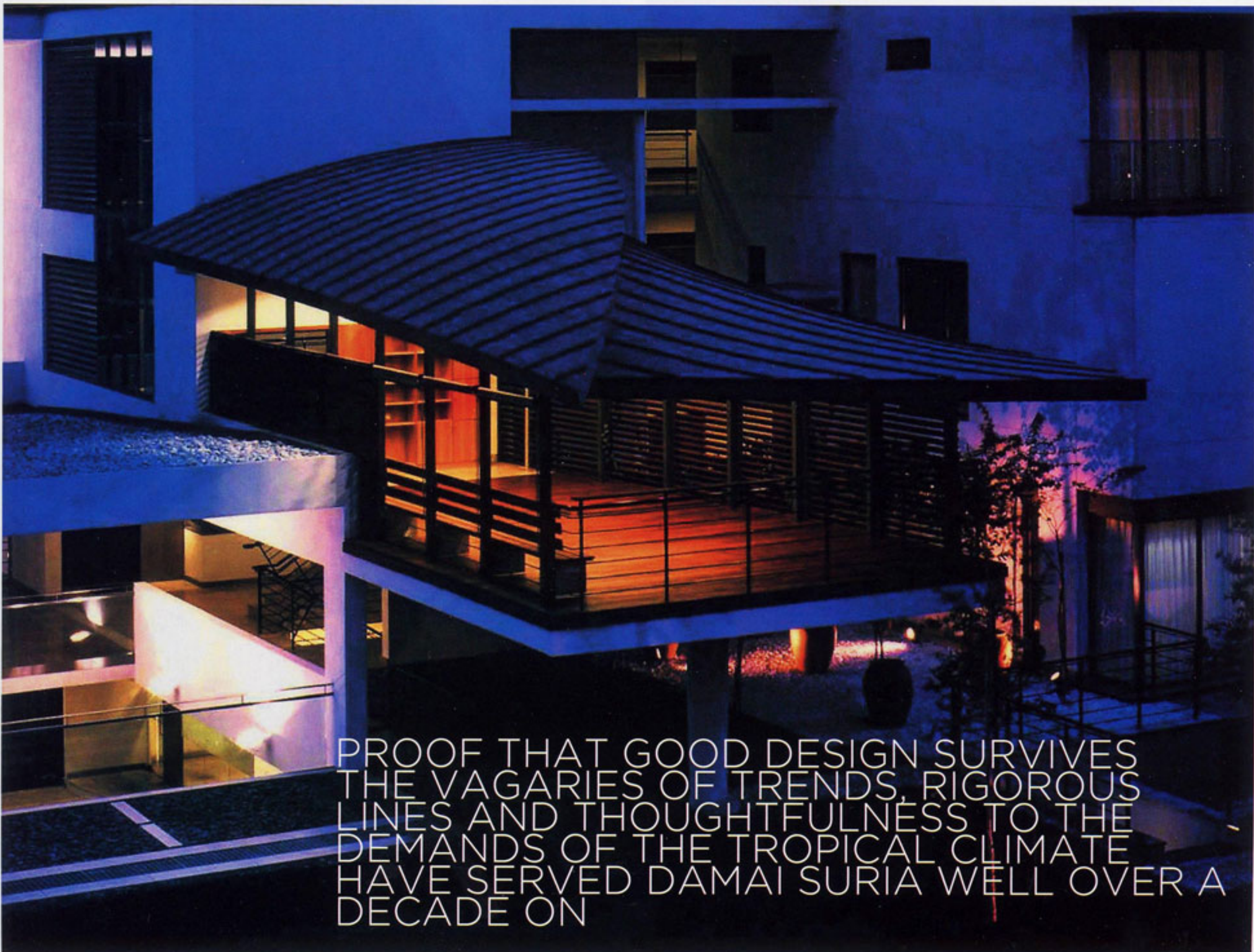
"Architecture is a profession where you need to be older before you enjoy it. It's a hard slog and you work like a donkey. By the time you build your portfolio, you're getting on. But being older also means you have the luxury of reflecting on the work that you do and what you have achieved."



DAMAI SURIA

One of the first truly luxury condominium developments in Kuala Lumpur, Damai Suria wowed the architecture cognoscenti with its simplicity and sophistication. The rectangular blocks featured a sleek titanium-zinc roof while the laminated glass windows and sliding louvred sunscreens endow the facade with an interesting architectural language.





PROOF THAT GOOD DESIGN SURVIVES
THE VAGARIES OF TRENDS, RIGOROUS
LINES AND THOUGHTFULNESS TO THE
DEMANDS OF THE TROPICAL CLIMATE
HAVE SERVED DAMAI SURIA WELL OVER A
DECADE ON

IRINGAN HIJAU

Commissioned by Dawntree Properties, the same developer as Damai Suria, Iringan Hijau comprises two 10-storey buildings housing 70 apartments of varied sizes. The facades are articulated by sun-shading devices that also extend privacy and protection from monsoon downpours, while allowing views of the greenery and landscape into the apartments. The general landscaping even includes rock gardens for semi-covered public areas.





BUILT SHORTLY AFTER DAMAI SURIA,
IRINGAN HIJAU IS A STARKER TAKE ON
CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AND
FINDS POETRY IN CONCRETE AND GLASS



SRI DAMAI BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Blending into the serene environment of the Clearwater Sanctuary Gold Resort in Batu Gajah, the row of chalet-like rooms hugs the shoreline. Chris established an intimate relationship between shore and water with the open-air balconies arching over the edge. He added tension wires on the sides and overhead for creepers to colonise in an effort to blur and soften the demarcation between the building structures and the natural surroundings.

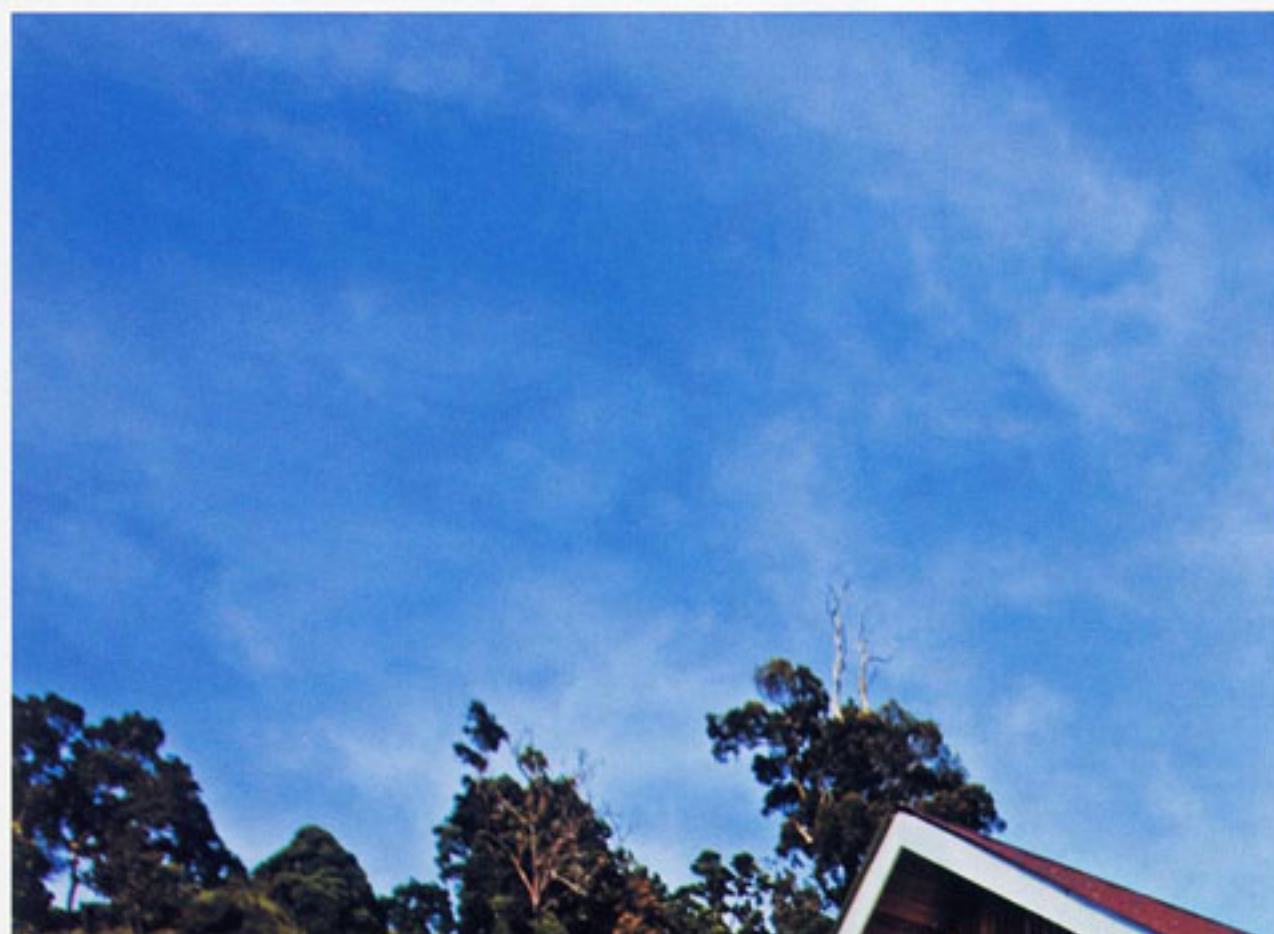
OVERLOOKING THE LOTUS-LADEN LAKE, CHRIS SWITCHES GEARS WITH APLOMB, CONJURING UP A TROPICAL RETREAT WHICH CELEBRATES ITS NATURAL SURROUNDINGS





BELUM RAINFOREST RESORT

Standing on Pulau Banding, an island off Tasik Temenggor, north of the Royal Belum Forest, which is 130 million years old, the resort was conceived as a sustainable development. A combination of new buildings and renovated structures, the resort boasts eco-friendly details like huruhara walls constructed from recycled bricks, sapling screens harvested from fast-growing indigenous trees, a safari roof insulated and ventilated by air-gaps, concealed catch-basins for storm-water management and a system to recover the heat generated from air-conditioners for use in warming up water.





AS BEFITTING ONE OF MALAYSIA'S
PREMIER ECOTOURISM HOLIDAY
DESTINATIONS, THE ARCHITECTURE
ATTEMPTS TO TREAD LIGHTLY ON
THE ENVIRONMENT WITH ENOUGH
DESIGN DETAILS TO KEEP THINGS
INTERESTING

PULAU BANDING RAINFOREST RESEARCH CENTRE

Conceived for local and foreign scientists to discover and research the rich bio-diversity of the Belum Temenggor forest, of which Pulau Banding is part, the buildings are tropical friendly with sloping roofs and high ceilings. **R**





RECYCLED FEATURES LIKE
TIMBER SLATTED WALLS
ARE APPROPRIATE TO THE
ETHOS OF THE CENTRE