

## **DRESSING UP SPACE**

*Interior designing finds a growing niche in the corporate world.*

Interior design has an important place in a company's corporate image, its employees' productivity and relations, and marketing strategies. Despite its infancy in Malaysia, industry players concur that interior design is slowly gaining ground in terms of awareness of its importance in corporate planning.

'One might call it the missing link,' says an industry observer. 'It's quite funny how something so "soft" can play such a critical role in the company's bottomline.'

Packaging is the name of the game these days. Generally, an excellent product minus attractive packaging equals poor sales. And what poor sales does to a corporation's P&L (profit and loss) is pretty obvious.

Similarly, attractive packaging of the company helps management to 'sell' the corporation. Comments like, 'I want my office to look like that office' or 'I need a good showroom to draw in more customers' are not unusual. Most corporations are very conscious of their image these days, adds the industry observer. 'Everybody wants to be dynamic and unique too.'

The benefit is not just aesthetics. Efficient use of space can reduce operating costs and facilitate work flow. This is particularly true if there is limited space. Malaysia's problem is not as acute compared to Hong Kong's but space (residential as well as commercial), is increasingly becoming a scarce commodity in Malaysia, especially in Kuala Lumpur.

Even so, the inertia about roping in interior designers remains. Their recognition as professionals is lacking. What's more is that they are often mixed up with interior decorators, says Catherine Lai, managing director of ESCA Designs Sdn Bhd.

'When we introduce ourselves as interior designers, people would straightaway think that we're decorators; merely buying things and putting them in proper places. But that's not the case. We're very much like an architect, but we specialise in the interior,' Lai explains.

By industry definition, an interior designer is 'a professional specialised in interior design with in-depth knowledge of space planning, conceptual three-dimensional design, detail project development and management.' As such, a good interior designer has skills which are tailored to the specific needs of interior planning. Architects, on the other hand, have a broader-based training to cater to the details of building design.

‘For interior spaces, significant attention must be paid to details because of the high level of human interface,’ Lai explains. ‘And believe me, a qualified interior designer will be more beneficial than the most senior project architect. This is not saying who’s better, it’s just an analysis of function.’

Interior designers, unlike decorators, do much more than just choose and mix colour. They deal with many complex issues like co-ordination of the various specialised disciplines and project management functions. But most interior designers will offer their ‘complete service’ or total package.

In other words, they handle all aspects of a project from background and needs research to engaging contractors and supervising the complete constructions and installation all the way up to move-in and post-project completion evaluation – all for a professional fee, of course.

Alan Loke, design director of Juruhasan Consult Sdn Bhd says, ‘We normally find ourselves part of a project team to provide interior design services and site co-ordination work. We do not tie up with contractors and we also do not work on turnkey packages. We act solely as an interior design consultant and only invite contractors to tender for the contract on behalf of our clients.’

How does a typical interior designer work? Chan Yue Yee, director of Design Council Sdn Bhd explains: ‘Upon commissioning by a client, interior designers normally start with a project brief and expand it into a complete data base of all pertinent information to successfully plan and design the project. Then layout plans are prepared based in the information gathered and given to their clients for reviewing purposes. They will modify the plans and layouts until their clients are satisfied with the concept functions and aesthetics.’

As tastes differ from client to client and designer to designer, a compromise has to be struck somewhere. Says Dr Jalid Rejad, an architect with Hijjas Kasturi Associates Sdn Bhd, ‘Compromising one’s own tastes with that of the client’s is quite critical.’ He adds, ‘If you have a good relationship with the client, and the client knows you well, you’ll basically have the say. If you don’t know the client well, then you’ll have to be more subtle in bringing your ideas across. You’ll have to ask a lot of questions, and explain a lot.’ Effective communication is the key, Jalid reckons.

But he does not believe that clients are always right. Say Jalid, ‘They come to us; we’re the professionals, and therefore we should know our trade. But they’re one up as far as their organisation is concerned. And we need to have that input to blend into the total design. If they have a certain image that they want to create, they’ll have to let us know. For me, there’s no such thing as right and wrong because taste *is* a very subjective thing.’

The most important thing, however, is the concept that one wants to develop, both the interior and exterior of the project. Says Jalid, ‘If the architect and the interior designer do not see eye to eye on a particular concept, then the project will suffer.’

The problem with architects and interior designers, in general, is that they cannot communicate very well, Jalid observes. 'They can draw very well, yes. But for the ordinary man, it's hard to grasp abstract ideas. In addition to models, they expect some explanation.'

Architects generally work on the overall interior and the interior designer goes a little deeper, Jalid says. 'Perhaps into the psychology of the area or space.'

'You must be a little bit of everything to be a good interior designer, not just artistic and creative,' Lai tells **Malaysian Business**. 'And maybe a little business minded as well.'

Then there is the question of cost. It varies according to the size of the project. It can be anything from a few thousand ringgit to hundreds of thousands of ringgit. Spending a few million ringgit is also not uncommon, says Benny Tan, managing director of BT Design Sdn Bhd, a 51 per cent owned subsidiary of the Berjaya Group.

Tan says he is very selective of his clients, and his criteria for choosing a client is not based on the size of the budget or the scale of the project, but the client himself. 'I would normally know the person or if he's recommended by friends and associates,' Tan explains.

While there are interior designers who concentrate on residential projects, the number is very small. More tend to skew toward hotels, holiday resorts, condominiums, corporate offices, clubs, restaurants, shopping complexes, hospitals, parks, schools and boutique. The lure: megabucks, especially with the federal and state governments' emphasis on tourism.

But competition in the industry is still described by its players as friendly. Says Tan, 'The industry has a lot of room to grow, and there's enough to go around.'

'All the designers in town are good at what they are doing,' Lai opines. 'I think the key to success in this industry is how you service your clients, the quality of your contract management and your public relations.'

Also, to remain successful, interior designers have been diversifying into other business-related interests like the manufacturing of furniture for export. Tan's outfit currently mass produces upmarket furniture for export to the United States and Europe. 'Part of the diversification exercise is also to protect the business from economic recession.' Furniture and recession aside, BT Design's turnover on designing fee alone is about 4.5 million rgt/year.

While it is difficult to even estimate the size of the market, industry players believe it is worth hundreds of millions of ringgit. Says Loke, 'It's difficult to assess. To date, there are no statistics compiled on the industry's size or growth rate. Based on my experience, the momentum of the industry dances in tandem with the national economic health.'

Whether the present boom period can be sustained to fuel the interior design industry remains to be seen. Adds Loke, ‘ A recession can disrupt many things in the industry. And even when nobody’s able to predict the annual growth rate, I have seen some new faces in the industry.’ That, in itself speaks volumes of the industry, says an interior designer who prefers anonymity. ‘When the business is good, it attracts competitors.’

But it is not local competitors that the interior designers are worried about. Granted, the locals may have not have the experience or the expertise in some complicated projects, but they can handle most projects. ‘We can do it, given the opportunity,’ Lai says. International hotel chains, it seems, engage only interior designers commissioned by their headquarters abroad. And when they establish themselves in places like Malaysia, the foreign interior designers will follow and undertake the projects here. Their prices are normally high.

When foreign interior design consultants charge exorbitant fees, clients have no problems or complaints, Lai says. But when it comes to local designers, clients have little confidence. To curb the problem, Lai proposes that every foreign designer operating in Malaysia tie up with a local partner to facilitate the exchanging of ideas and expertise. ‘In the process of creating a unique Malaysian identity, local designers will be able to give better input,’ Lai opines.

Then there is the lack of training institutions in Malaysia to cater to interior design. ‘The days of pushing and rearranging furniture are over,’ Jalid says. ‘Interior designers have to think about things that are more permanent, and training is needed. Interior designers does not come at the last part of a project these days. Designers have to work closely with architects and other consultants from the planing stages of a project to come out with a good layout plan.’

Interior design or interior architecture deals with a ‘space within space’. And while it is true that the correct combination of colours, fabrics, wallpaper, furniture, curtains, paintings, carpets and blinds make interior space look great, the question remains: ‘Is it necessary?’

The answer: Why not, it helps sell the company.