

city & country

REAL ESTATE
MATTERS

Housing in a post-pandemic world

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered our lives in many ways. One of the most significant changes is how we view our home, which is now more than a dwelling place. What does this mean for property developers and what can homebuyers expect post-pandemic?





Making a good sustainable town

A town can mean so many different things. What is foremost – a town has to be mindfully planned and carefully designed so people and nature can come together to share a common ground to call home.

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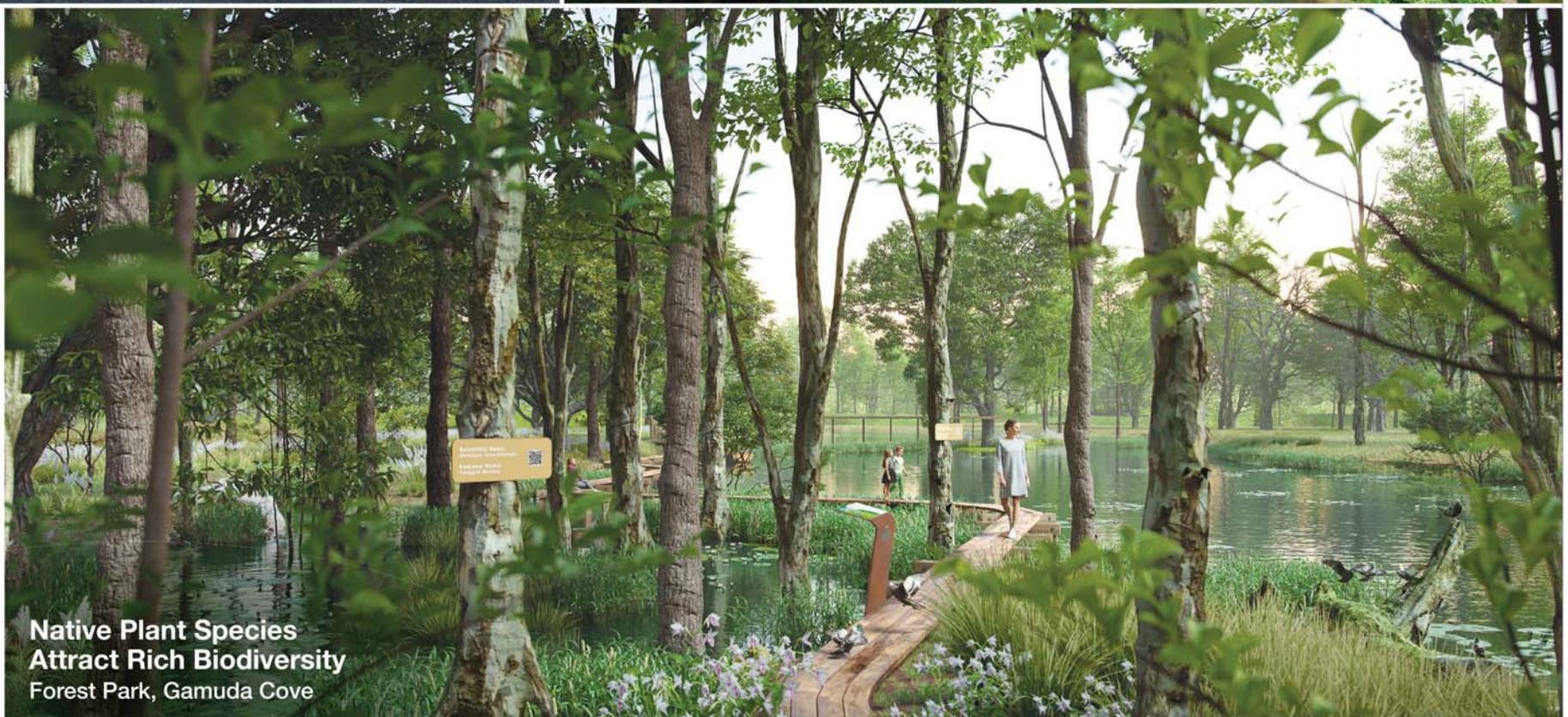
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**Making Public Spaces
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Wetlands Arboretum, Gamuda Cove



**Native Plant Species
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Forest Park, Gamuda Cove



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OVERVIEW

The post-pandemic market

BY E JACQUI CHAN
city.country@bizedge.com

None foresaw the upheaval that awaited us in early 2020. More than a year later, despite the emergence of more infectious Covid-19 variants, there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel as countries race to vaccinate their people. No matter when and how the pandemic ends, it has changed various aspects of our lives.

“Some of these changes had already been occurring at a slower pace pre-pandemic, but are now rapidly accelerating and becoming the norm. During this period, governments across the globe have been advocating the ‘stay at home’ and ‘work from home’ (WFH) practices. Home has always been a safe haven to many, offering security, safety and stability. It is the base where everything begins, although its functions have now extended beyond living,” says Knight Frank Malaysia deputy managing director Keith Ooi.

Savills Malaysia director of research and consultancy Amy Wong notes that homes are definitely a lot more multi-functional now, becoming a place to work, learn, play, exercise and entertain as well.

“Blurring the lines between living spaces means that space design is increasingly vital. Homeowners may now place greater emphasis on transforming their work-from-home spaces to be more productive (with a proper office desk and ergonomic chair) as well as making the background more ‘Zoom-friendly,’” she says.

CBRE | WTW group managing director Foo Gee Jen says the trend of working from home as well as health and safety assessments like temperature monitoring and masking are expected to continue while online shopping will increase home delivery activities.

Savills World Research has indicated that working from home has a direct impact on the residential market as households now reassess their needs. The Savills sentiment survey indicated that 90% expect demand for home offices to increase, while 86% expect an increase in demand for high-speed internet.

A new perception of home

With changed needs and perception, what does it mean for developers?

Ooi believes there is a need to develop a genuine place to live rather than ones that are investment-oriented. This means more emphasis on the practicality of product, unit layout and finishes to cater for the different market segments.

He suggests “providing amenities such as individual work or study pods in common areas, or equipping spaces for social functions with power and internet connectivity for residents to host small-scale meetings. Residents can have the flexibility of working outside of their homes, while staying within the compound of their residential development”.

Other considerations are incorporation/adoption of technology to promote health and hygiene, usage of sustainable materials and products, improved maintenance of buildings and facilities, and provision of network infrastructure to equip the community with high-speed internet, says Ooi.

Wong notes that just after the first Movement Control Order (MCO) last year, some developers responded quickly to the change in demand and offered considerably larger built-ups at affordable prices.

Among the key marketing points for developers were affordable prices; flexible space and bigger lay-

Trends: What will stay and what will fade

TRENDS THAT WILL STAY	TRENDS THAT WILL FADE
Smart homes (IoT)	Downsizing of work space
Flexible space layouts in homes	Temperature checking at entrances to buildings
Flexible work arrangement/hybrid work policy	Wearing of masks and checking in
Online shopping	Entertainment facilities in common areas
Increased demand for warehouse space	Home equipment and appliances that are not energy-efficient
Touchless amenities in common facilities	
Virtual show gallery viewings	
Converting spaces in homes into dedicated work, study or leisure areas	
A preference for balconies and yards in high-rise developments	

SAVILLS MALAYSIA, KNIGHT FRANK MALAYSIA AND CBRE | WTW

What to expect

POSITIVE SIGNS	NEGATIVE SIGNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenge spending, revenge retail, revenge travelling • Pent-up demand for good residential properties, leading to soaring sales transactions, as interest rates are at an all-time low • Price correction in the property market • Redefinition of space use • Enhanced utilisation of big data to study consumer trends and make better business decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher number of properties in the auction list • More newly completed properties to flood the market • Increasing gap between the haves and have-nots, leading to increasing social need from the affected lower-income households for more affordable housing • Rich get richer, which translates into demand for investment products

SAVILLS MALAYSIA

SAVILLS MALAYSIA



Post-pandemic, I'd say we will go back to the basic key drivers of the economy — job security and wage levels, private and public investments into expanding the economy, and political stability and good governance.”
— Wong

outs; designs that cater for all ages, which include privacy zones, better lighting, comfortable working environment and energy efficiency; meeting the objective of both owner-occupiers and investors; accessibility to amenities; and access to private outdoor space and public green spaces like parks, which now command a premium, says Wong.

“Personally, I believe that additional emphasis should also be placed on better indoor ventilation and exposure to natural lighting. Developers can easily enhance their new products while staying relevant and sustainable,” she adds.

Meanwhile, Foo says more sales and marketing activities can be conducted online to reduce physical contact between buyers and sellers on site. However, he notes that buyers will still prefer to inspect show units and finalise sales and purchase conditions face-to-face.

Driving the property market post-pandemic

According to Wong, it would seem that homebuyers have been adjusting to the “new normal” or current situation by buying new residences. “This is shown from the National Property Information Centre (Npic) data, which recorded 80,694 transactions in 1Q2021, up 11% from 72,867 transactions in 1Q2020.

“I believe that the pre-pandemic property market wasn't exactly booming. So, post-pandemic, I'd say we will go back to the basic key drivers of the economy — job security and wage levels, private and public investments into expanding the economy, and political stability and good governance,” she opines.

Ooi says the government is helping by unveiling several incentives to support and boost the property market amid the adverse impact of the pandemic. These include the extension of the Home Ownership Campaign (HOC), exemption of Real

Property Gains Tax (RPGT) and the second round of the six-month loan moratorium. The record low interest rate environment is also positive for the property market, he adds.

“There will be a reset button for the property market, especially in areas where there is a high supply pipeline versus weaker demand. Prospective buyers and investors are spoilt for choice currently.”

He notes that more developers are throwing in offers and promotions to capture the target market and boost the sales of their newly launched products as well as to clear their existing inventories.

Wong is concerned about the impact that the impending supply and property overhang will have on the market post-pandemic. “The influx of newly completed properties may contribute to the property overhang situation. Adding on to it will be an anticipated increase in auction properties,” she says. She expects another round of price adjustment and market correction.

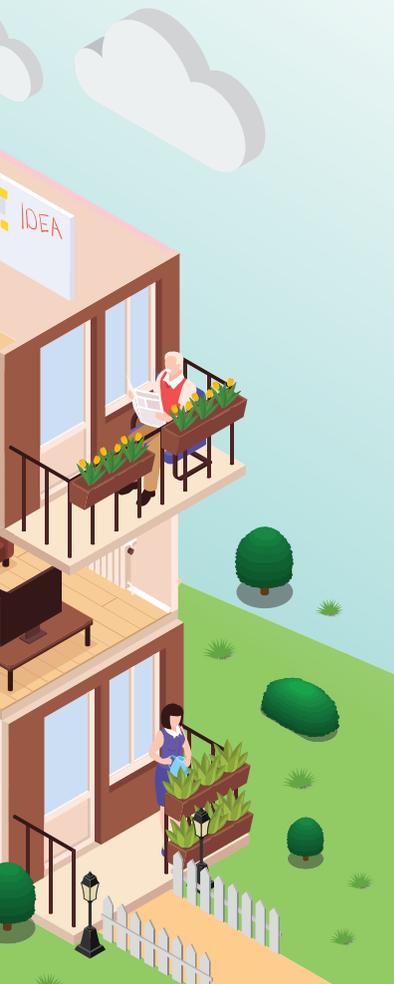
According to Wong, Npic data shows that as at 1Q2021, the number of overhang properties in Greater KL stood at 14,196 units, a reduction of 1,855 units compared with the preceding quarter. The overall value associated with the overhang units recorded was RM11.87 billion, down 11.3% within the stipulated review period.

Greater KL includes Sabak Bernam, Kuala Selangor, Kuala Langat and Hulu Selangor. Wong says Npic defines overhang units as units that have received their Certificate of Completion and Compliance but remain unsold for more than nine months after launch.

“Properties priced between RM400,000 and RM700,000 appear to be the most oversupplied category. They account for 43% (6,224 units) of the overall overhang stock as at 1Q2021. Those priced above RM1 million also contribute to the hard-to-sell category, accounting for 21% (3,002 units) of the overall overhang stock.

“The state of property overhang has been worrying as it reached new heights in the past decade. A

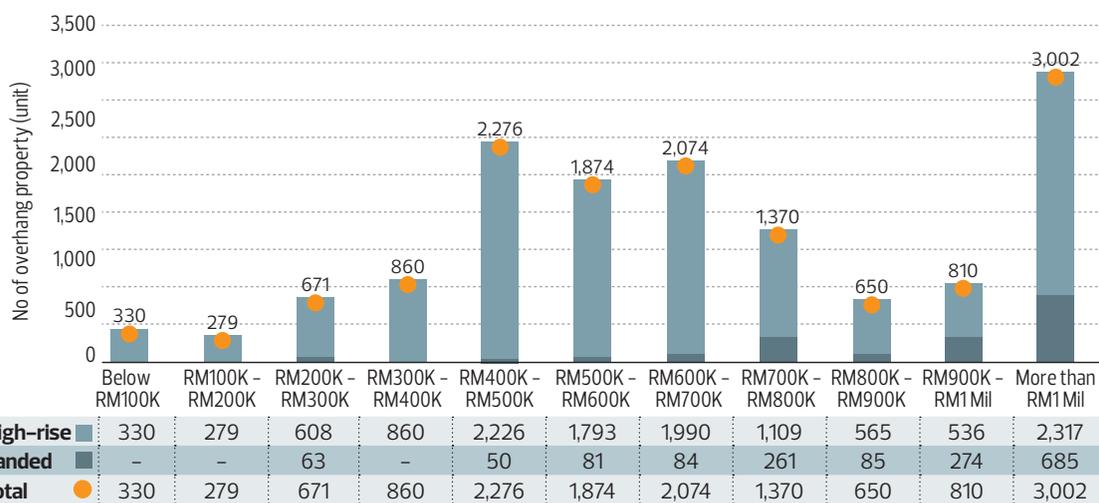




KNIGHT FRANK

NAPIC/SAVILLS MALAYSIA

Greater KL: Breakdown of property overhang by price range and type, 2010-1Q2021



There will be a reset button for the property market, especially in areas where there is a high supply pipeline versus weaker demand."

— Ooi

CBRE | WTW



Should WFH arrangements become the new normal, proximity/convenience in commuting to the office will not be top of the list in house selection. This may enable more families to move to locations with more space/land further from the city centre."

— Foo

realistic approach would be to steer future launch products towards the affordable price range to ensure a healthier take-up. Sources have also cited that renting the vacant unsold units would help ease the situation, while filling up the occupancy percentage of a completed residential project," says Wong.

Touching on the issue of impending supply, she notes that Napic's figure for units unsold under construction in Greater KL is 42,458 units as at 1Q2021.

"Units priced from RM500,000 to RM600,000 have the highest potential to contribute to overhang, having 8,739 units or 21% of the total count in its category. Those priced at more than RM1 million have 6,242 units unsold under construction.

"On the other hand, units that are unsold and not constructed at this point stands at 11,379. Again, those priced from RM500,000 to RM600,000 account for the highest portion at 30% (3,392 units). This is followed by those priced affordably between RM200,000 and RM300,000 at 23% (2,612 units).

"Such large impending supply could be attributed to the wrong choice of location as well as the over-optimism when launching products. Developers should seek advice from experienced and professional real estate consultancy services and conduct a detailed market and feasibility study during the project planning stage," says Wong.

Foo also believes there may be a rise in overhang of residential properties. "Established developers with financial reserves may hold units until the market recovers, but a downward price adjustment may be unavoidable."

When it comes to foreign investment, Wong believes it would require a stable government.

"The stability of the present government in seeing through its policies and instilling confidence in foreign investors will be critical when we exit the lockdown. Public funds for public investments

are quickly diminishing, and private funds have been consumed to pay for the costs of economic lockdown. Foreign investment will be one of the key sources of investment into the country.

"There is also a need to increase productivity levels. The government has to be more determined to upskill workers. This is a long-term commitment that requires a stable administration," opines Wong.

"Recent statistics by the Department of Statistic Malaysia showed a drop in mean monthly salaries and wages in 2020, a first-time decline since the series began in 2010. Many households may default on their housing loans. If this gets out of control, a property bubble may burst," cautions Foo.

"A drop in the sales rate to below 50% would render many housing projects unviable and recently launched projects may become abandoned. Buyers may see the value of their investments disappear," he adds.

He also feels that it is not the right time to build more affordable housing (targeted at B40) as they are struggling to make ends meet and he believes that projects should be launched strategically based on demand for specific locations, market situation and good access.

Ooi, meanwhile, is concerned about the ability of homebuyers to get loans as financial institutions are adopting a cautious and frugal approach until the overall economy stabilises.

"To overcome these challenges, there is a need to improve the loan financing approval rate by having innovative financing packages from financial institutions to support homebuyers, especially first-time ones as this group is younger and has just started work and would have less savings and reserves.

"Innovative financing should take into account their potential career progression. For example, a step-up instalment financing plan where in the future with higher salaries, these borrowers will be

able to afford higher monthly instalments," says Ooi.

Of course, due to the higher level of unemployment and pay cuts, housing affordability and loan repayment can become a problem.

Ooi believes that aside from the need to develop more affordable products to cater for the general populace (many are priced out of the market in key suburbs), developers can be innovative by being more sustainable, using recycled materials, increasing productivity at lower cost by using the Industrialised Building System and so on.

The issues of demand-supply mismatch and irresponsible market speculations also need to be addressed, he says. "Measures may include implementation of a collective and comprehensive real-time housing data comprising property sales transactions to enable developers, consultants and market participants to make appropriate decisions and to have development plan and planning control (zoning, use and plot ratio/density) gazetted."

What the future holds

Ooi expects another round of price correction for certain property products and those in selected locations, in particular where supply outstrips demand and where there is a mismatch in product and price affordability.

"There will be growing demand for properties, especially new landed houses, outside the city. They will be in established and upcoming suburbs where prices are more affordable or competitive and where there is good connectivity and easy accessibility via road and rail links."

He says with the new norm of working from home, more space within the home is required to have a balance or to segregate between work and life. He foresees a higher preference for properties with larger built-ups and more rooms that can be converted into a home office/study for added privacy.

"For households where the income levels are not affected by the pandemic, WFH means less travel and less commuting and entertainment expenses. This has led to an increase in savings (lockdown savings) and, thus, may attract more millennials into homeownership.

"We also expect to see advancement in technology with more developers shifting towards digital marketing, 3D home tours, online booking and such," says Ooi, adding that there will be opportunities for investors in the auction market as foreclosures are likely to increase.

Foo, too, expects a price correction in the residential market, depending on product, location and developers' holding power.

"Preference for locations with convenient access is expected to change. Should WFH arrangements become the new normal, proximity/convenience in commuting to the office will not be top of the list in house selection. This may enable more families to move to locations with more space/land further from the city centre.

"The pandemic has impacted the pattern of spending. People will be more careful with their purchases, which may impact housing demand," he says.

Foo also notes that the pandemic has educated buyers on the importance of energy efficiency, and safety and health and, therefore, properties providing features that address them will be the preferred choice.

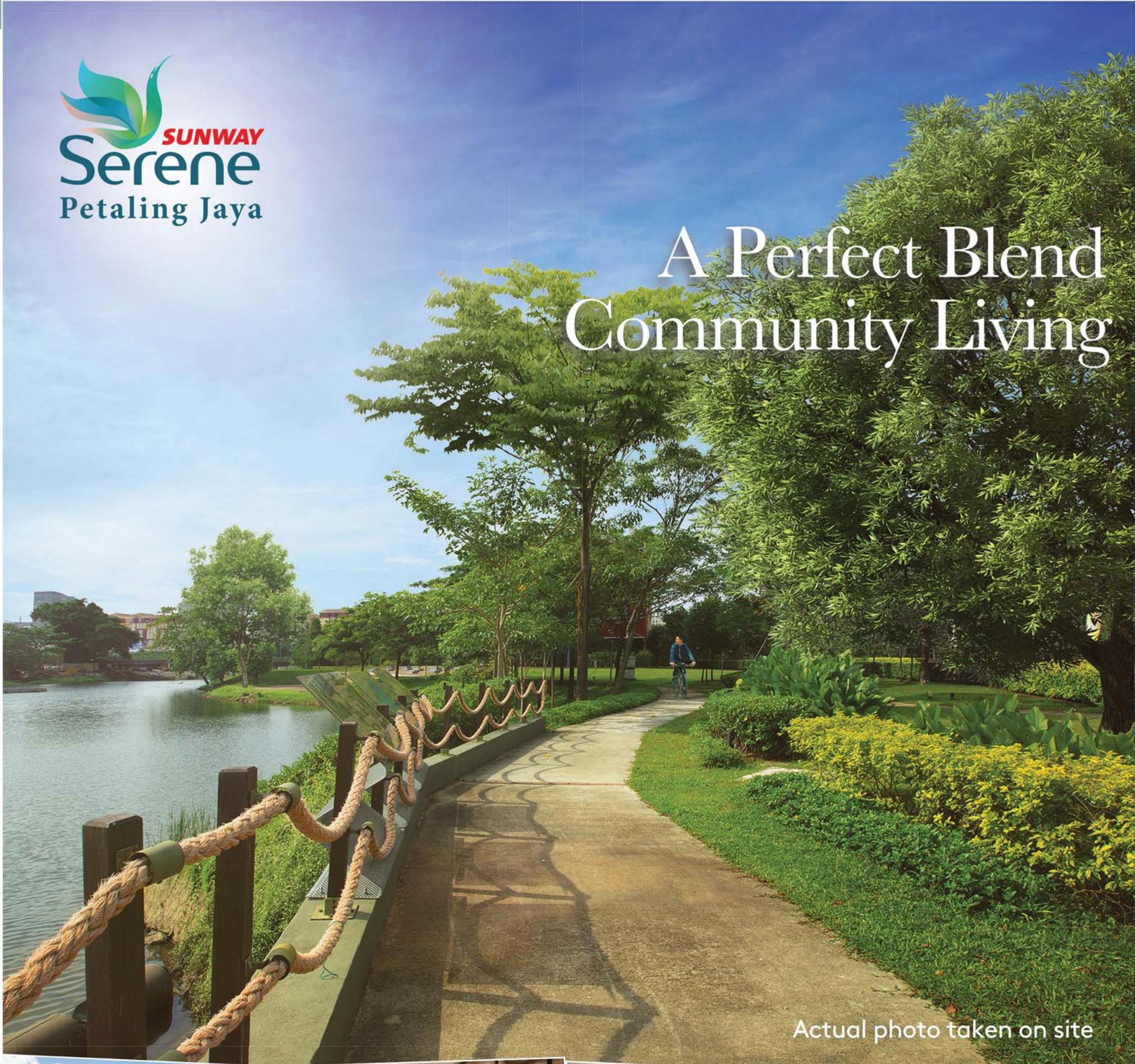
As for Wong, she says the concept of sustainability of the overall real estate ecosystem has been overlooked. "While we cannot deny the need for aggressive development and growth in a developing country, instances such as excess supply in various real estate sectors have been with us for some time.

"For instance, the residential sector has seen rising overhang units since the abolishment of the Developer Interest Bearing Scheme (DIBS). The office sector has seen large impending office space supply, suppressing rental growth since 2013. The retail space per capita has been increasing over time, causing some of the existing malls to suffer from low occupancy and footfall," she says.

She concludes that the development framework revolving around the environmental, social and governance (ESG) aspects needs to be in place so that the overall real estate ecosystem will be sustainable and resilient enough to cushion any undesirable impact. ■



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• Approving Authority: Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur • Tenure: Leasehold (Expiry 11/03/2117) • Expected Date of Completion: October 2024 • Encumbrances: • Total Units: Tower C - 467 units, Tower D - 584 units • Price: Tower C - RM898,000 (Min) - RM1,434,000 (Max), Tower D - RM775,000 (Min) - RM1,434,000 (Max) • Bumiqutera Discount: 5%. Disclaimer: The information contained herein is subject to change without notification as may be required by relevant authorities or the developer's consultants and cannot form part of an offer or contract. Whilst every care is taken in providing this information, the owner, developer and managers cannot be held liable for variations. All illustrations and pictures are Artist's Impression only. The items are subject to variations, modifications and substitutions as may be recommended by the Company's Consultants and/or relevant approving authorities.

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Gamuda Cove's Forest Park is an ode to biodiversity, which provides clean air, water and food to support a healthy ecosystem.

With Covid-19 cases surging worldwide as more virulent strains emerge, it is apparent that the coronavirus has become an indelible fact of life moving forward. The hope of returning to pre-pandemic norms with widespread vaccinations has given way to a reality of an endemic.

When the outbreak hit early last year, its impacts were most keenly felt in densely populated cities.

It became evident that intermingling in public spaces, which had never been designed with pandemic precautions in mind, presented risks to safety and health.

Then Malaysia entered a two-month-long movement control order (MCO) in March last year, when roads were virtually deserted and economic activity grounded to a halt.

Since then, many Malaysians have taken the opportunity to visit parks and seek activities surrounded by nature to beat cabin fever and gradually, environmental awareness began to build in the public sphere. Many people, it seemed, started to appreciate the restorative qualities of nature after months of continuous lockdown.

Now, over a year later, as Malaysia ramps up its vaccination drive as it prepares for a new norm of living with Covid-19, many property developers, urban planners, architects and even policymakers are rethinking the design and planning of our developments, land use and public spaces, towards balancing safety, suitability and sustainability in the new normal.

Gamuda Green Plan: Reimagining the future

In line with its core development principles, and parallel to growing momentum worldwide to embrace the green economy, Gamuda Group's experience across diverse sectors has seen the creation of the Gamuda Green Plan 2025 (GGP).

The GGP sets out bold targets with an emphasis on design and planning, circular construction, community building, digitalisation, and environmental and biodiversity stewardship. Gamuda Land aims to contribute towards these targets by focusing on mindful planning and execution throughout its townships. Its efforts include prioritising pedestrian, cycling and other sustainable modes of transport in its master planning to reduce carbon emissions, while incorporating energy-efficient standards across its developments.

"The Gamuda Green Plan challenges ourselves, and industry conventions, towards continuously developing a more sustainable approach to infrastructure and property development. As such, one of the key areas we focus on is design and planning, simply because as a property developer, this is where we can and have delivered the most significant impacts since our inception," said Ngan Chee Meng, chief executive officer of Gamuda Land.



“While we work on building the future responsibly, we continue to prioritise the preservation and conservation of the natural environments in which we operate” - Ngan



The rehabilitation of Gamuda Gardens has seen the return of various birds species as captured in its biodiversity audits.



Townsquare at Gamuda Cove is mindfully designed with al fresco streets and alleys emphasising healthy social engagement.

When we get the places right, the town works

“One of the key principles driving our town-making is ‘When we get the places right, the town works,’ and this translates into the mindful planning that has been put into bringing together key components to give each township a unique personality. This applies to how we lay out the streets to where the town centre is located, tree-lined neighbourhoods, and a central park where people can come together and get to know each other through great placemaking,” said Ngan.

For instance, Townsquare in Gamuda Cove is master planned to be located in the Heart of Cove, set to be the commercial and leisure centre of the township. It is thoughtfully planned to complement the township’s residential precincts with essentials within easy reach of a 10-minute walk or cycle from home, through tree-lined dedicated pathways.

Acknowledging prevailing post-pandemic retail trends, the design of Townsquare takes into account changing consumer needs in the new normal, while incorporating sustainable principles. Its car-free, pedestrian-friendly streets invite visitors to take the air about town, with open, al fresco avenues and alleys emphasising healthy social engagement, encouraging physical distancing and reducing carbon footprints.

Integrated landscaping throughout the lifestyle retail hub provides shade for passers-by, reinforced by tree canopies extending above surrounding buildings. In this way, Townsquare addresses the main challenges to open retail spaces in Malaysia, namely the weather, heat and rain.

Aside from tree canopies and fountains to cool surrounding temperatures, its design uses wind flow and solar radiation analysis to maintain an ambient target of 28°C, with the Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI) as a benchmark for comfort in outdoor conditions.

In this vein, twentyfive.7 in Kota Kemuning has facilitated accessibility for residents and the surrounding community with readily available F&B options, grocers, pharmacies and essentials in Quayside Mall, delivering daily necessities just a short stroll away from residential precincts even under ongoing movement controls. Complementing the experience is the Quayside and promenade leading from the mall out into the lush pet-friendly central park, where the community can reconnect with nature while staying safe close to home.

Connectivity and accessibility are key to work near home

Well-connected cities and towns, both in terms of physical transport links and digital connectivity, are also increasingly important as populations remain concentrated in metropolitan areas, but away from crowded urban hotspots, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Solid digital infrastructure will enable the shift in paradigm to work from home or work near home (WNH).

“We have taken steps towards the realisation of 5G infrastructure in Gamuda Cove, which will enable smart city solutions such as smart mobility and improve efficiency in resource utilisation,” Ngan said.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the home place and work place are more fluid than ever. With this in mind, Gamuda Land has applied the WNH concept across its

developments, to give owners the best of both worlds when it comes to balancing personal and productivity in the new normal.

By shifting working hubs closer to home, associated commutes are also reduced in terms of time and distance, aligning with the GGP for a 10% reduction in transport emissions across Gamuda Land townships by 2025.

Thoughtfully planned into the new precinct of Illaria at Gamuda Gardens are working pods surrounded by nature’s tranquility, where people can work, network or chill in a lush alcove just a stroll away from home. The pods will feature a modern outdoor office concept equipped with furniture and high-speed Wi-Fi connectivity. Similar WNH spaces have also been implemented across Gamuda Land’s developments.

Building with respect to nature through preservation of biodiversity

“While we work on building the future responsibly, we continue to prioritise the preservation and conservation of the natural environments in which we operate. Biodiversity underpins the provision of clean air, water and food integral to support human health, and helps mitigate climate change. By listening to what the land has to tell us, we work to restore the land to what it was before us,” Ngan explained, adding that the emergence of crises such as the Covid-19 outbreak may be related to unsustainable approaches to the natural environment.

This is supported by a new rapid assessment by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and International Livestock Research Institute on zoonotics

suggesting that epidemics will become more frequent as the climate continues to change.

“Towards this end, Gamuda Land has conducted nine biodiversity audits across our townships, with the results published on our website. The results help us to comprehensively assess the health of the natural environment in all of our townships,” said Ngan.

Beyond biodiversity audits, Gamuda Land has pledged to plant one million trees and saplings by 2023, towards the global fight against climate change. Some 334,248 trees have been planted across its townships thus far.

“We have allocated RM24 million for the development of a 90-acre Forest Park and a Wetlands Arboretum at Gamuda Cove to preserve and propagate plant and native tree species that suit local habitats, which will include a living-tree museum in a Riparian Jungle setup as part of our efforts to bring biodiversity back to this area,” said Ngan.

Biodiversity enhancement efforts are also seeing results in the northern corridor of Klang Valley in Gamuda Gardens, where biodiversity audits have shown a gradual increase in several native and non-native bird species to the township’s Central Park in recent times.

Guided by the Gamuda Parks Biodiversity Policy in minimising environmental impact across all Gamuda Land townships, extensive research is conducted on the most suitable trees and flora for planting, with priority given to those with ecological benefits and cost-effective, long-term growth potential. 77% of trees planted in the Gamuda Gardens Central Park are native species while 33% are classified as having conservation importance.

“Instead of manicured landscapes, which place greater emphasis on aesthetics, we have opted for a more mindful and sustainable approach by selecting native plants to attract the right biodiversity elements,” said Ngan.

In its action plan against climate change, Gamuda Land has also accelerated its developments’ design and planning towards a greener economy. Its Celadon City Sports Club in Vietnam is the first solar energy operated sports complex in Ho Chi Minh City. In the following months, Quayside Mall in Kota Kemuning will be harnessing solar energy in line with the Group’s goal to reduce its carbon footprint compared to business as usual.

With climate change no longer a societal issue but an existential threat, sustainability is now a driving imperative, with implications running across economic sectors, value chains and organisations. Accordingly, sustainable development approaches must be internalised at every level. With this in mind, Gamuda Land is propagating the transition to a greener economy throughout its processes and communities, as it builds townships to stand the test of time. Guided by the right development principles with goals set out in the GGP, it continues to take firm steps forward towards creating a more sustainable future for its stakeholders.



Celadon City Sports Club in Ho Chi Minh City is fully solar powered.



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ARCHITECTURE

Rethinking the design and use of new homes

BY **WONG KING WAI**
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Since the pandemic reared its ugly head, the days of dining out and coming home to shower, laze around in your favourite home clothes and sleep have diminished. Now, the home is more than just a place for personal activities; it is also an office and a school. We speak to four architects to find out what their thoughts are on the future of home designs.

“Before the pandemic, modern houses in Malaysia built in the previous millennium were influenced by the tropical design trend. Later, the Balinese style of architecture was adopted,” says Datuk Ezumi Harzani Ismail, president of Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia (PAM) and director of Arkitek MAA Sdn Bhd.

“The boundaries between indoor and outdoor were eliminated in many private home designs, with the outdoor dining area, semi-outdoor bathroom, courtyard garden living and terraces blurring the boundaries. The key spaces at the time included the garden terrace area, outdoor living area — which brings occupants out to nature — and indoor courtyard, to bring nature into the house.”

For Veritas Design Group vice-president Lillian Tay, in addition to rethinking the design of the home, she observes that the pandemic has pushed the need for a change in policies and plans that cater for the wider community.

“The unexpected scale and unravelling of this global pandemic shows that Covid-19 will become endemic and other contagious infections will continue to arise in the future. Recurring periods of community infections, quarantines and lockdowns will force us to rethink how we previously organised our lives — domestic life, work life and even recreation,” says Tay, who was PAM president in 2019/20.

“Many affected nations are compelled to review policies and plan for increased contingencies and more strategic linkages between public and private healthcare. Public health management should be extended to integrate with the planning of community space of the city to promote healthier urban environments.”

Tay goes on to say that this includes more accessible public green spaces that can serve their immediate neighbourhood, which include pocket parks, open squares and shady sidewalks. She adds that there should be more “green” infrastructure to make cities more liveable during an epidemic and manage community infections effectively.

“KL, to its credit, had embarked on the River of Life project to upgrade its river bank and historical city centre. This lays the foundation for a wider network of connected urban greenery, open spaces and enhanced comfort levels on our streets to promote walkability and create green corridors needed to restore biodiversity across the urban and suburban sprawl,” says Tay.

To Eleena Jamil Architect founder and principal Eleena Jamil, the home is the biggest investment for most families. “Most see their homes as a place to grow and nurture a family as well as to entertain guests. The focus has consistently been on the separation of ‘public’ zones such as living, dining and dry kitchen from the ‘private’ zones such as the bedrooms, wet kitchen and utility rooms,” she notes.



Top right: The living room opens out to the outdoors for ventilation and plenty of sunlight

Bottom right: An example of flexible planning where sliding panels can convert a space into a home office or virtual classroom

“The main space of the home, the living dining area, must be designed to open up to the outside — a garden, veranda or balcony — to admit more natural ventilation and sunlight.”
— Tay

“Open plans combining living, dining and dry kitchen with a large continuous space seem to be the preference. This open plan works well in terms of normal everyday life, where owners can tend to the children or entertain guests while preparing meals, for example. It also works well in encouraging cross-ventilation and maximising natural daylight.

“However, a rethink of this approach may be necessary after the pandemic with the increasing need to accommodate more functions within a home such as working, exercising, broadcasting on social media and so on.”

For T&T Architect Sdn Bhd founder and managing director Datuk Tung Mun Kiat, his approach to the home has always been about creating a place “where people can live comfortably and efficiently”, going beyond just meeting the client’s brief but also what the market demands.

“Since the pandemic, the boundaries between where we work, live, play and relax within the home are being redrawn. People need places where they can be alone and recharge and different places to get together with family,” he points out.



Right: Outdoor spaces such as balconies, terraces and roof gardens may become more crucial in designing post-pandemic homes. Project: End-lot House



T&T ARCHITECTS

Flexible spaces

When it comes to figuring out what home designs will look like, all of the architects mention the same thing — flexible spaces.

“Working from home and learning online give new meaning to the word ‘home’. It blurs the physical boundary between workspace and home. Thus, flexibility in space arrangement is the key to future home design, so that the same space can be converted to suit different functions at different times, and the layout or furniture arrangement can be adjusted accordingly,” says PAM’s Ezumi.

He suggests designs that include a “collapsible internal partition system, or at least, a dry wall construction that can be easily removed to allow the space to be reconfigured without affecting the building structure”. The use of a modular prefabricated wall system offers the best solution to accommodate this requirement, he adds.

For Veritas’ Tay, the post-pandemic home needs to be versatile and ready for quick, temporary conversions of part of the open areas within the unit into an instant home office or virtual classroom. “Folding or sliding lightweight screens should be built into every unit to allow families to easily create a separate, quiet niche with acoustic separation, spare electrical outlets, WiFi and, if possible, daylight and natural ventilation,” she says.

“For new buildings, designing for flexible convertible spaces is more viable than simply making residential units larger to accommodate working from home, online classrooms, home quarantine and so on, as housing affordability remains an issue.”

Says Eleena, “Homes will need to be designed to be more flexible to allow people to socialise, rest or work quietly within the confines of their house. There is also a need to start rethinking how spaces can cater for our physical and mental health during long periods at home.

“The ability to adapt spaces to different functions will become an important design criteria. There will be demand for open spaces that can be physically divided by folding or sliding doors and moveable or adaptable furniture.”

Tung says, “Instead of a single functional space, the approach of Flexible Space Planning will be adopted, where the residential spaces can be extended into different activity zones. For example, a guest room that can double as a remote office or learning space, a balcony can be converted into an outdoor yoga deck or used for urban farming or a picnic area.

“In addition, more attention will be given to the arrangement of the workplace at home. Instead of just a space slotted in the corner of the living room or under the stairs, it will be designed as a completely separate space with partition, comfortable furniture and perhaps technically equipped and sound-insulated.”



Top left: Integrating the landscape into the house design for connection to nature will help with mental health and personal well-being



Bottom left: Multigenerational homes may include elderly-friendly toilets, among others. Project: Tuai



“People need places where they can be alone and recharge and different places to get together with the family.”
— Tung

Additional design considerations

A home is also made up of other spaces and the architects provide their views on which of these may need a rethink.

According to Ezumi, the new generation of homebuyers prefer smart homes. “New home designers will need to consider wireless connectivity and the Internet of Things (IoT) as a key feature in home design.”

He adds that good ventilated spaces with sufficient exposure to natural sunlight are equally important to help prevent the incubation of Covid-19. This means architects must take into consideration the “correct positioning of windows and their detailing to allow them to be open all the time”.

Ezumi highlights several spaces that will also require keen attention to ensure that a home is not only comfortable but functional as well. “The living room needs to be spacious enough to allow rearrangement of furniture to accommodate a working desk, otherwise you would need to sacrifice the family’s dining table for working and learning online.

“The kitchen had become a neglected space in modern living as most young families preferred to socialise and dine out before the pandemic. But today, it has become an essential space as families bake and cook as social activities, and more people start baking at home to generate side income. In short, the kitchen needs to be sizeable, with an island table nice and bright, with clean finishes.”

He adds that the storeroom can be converted into a study to allow for privacy when working and the balcony, especially in a high-rise development, will allow residents to connect with the outdoor environment and have that “outdoor feeling” when having to isolate in a unit.

For Veritas’ Tay, the design of the home will be more than just specific spaces but also in the dimensions of the space. She strongly advocates the return of “time-tested principles of traditional buildings that respond to their climate and natural environment”.

This means better ventilation with good airflow. “The main space of the home, the living dining area, must be designed to open up to the outside — a garden, veranda or balcony — to admit more natural ventilation and sunlight,” she says.

“Instead of the regulated minimum set out in our building bylaws, more operable windows are needed in the home, including bedrooms, to reduce the dependence on air conditioning with oxygen-depleted recirculated air, even with the latest filtration.”

She adds that the design of the windows should be such that they are able to be opened even when it is raining.

Another design aspect Tay mentions is higher ceilings so that ceiling fans can be used in all



More emphasis will be placed on outdoor spaces and gardens with heightened privacy. Project: Vermani House

MARCTEY

DAVID YEOW



“Being outdoors in nature will also help improve one’s mental health and state of well-being.”
— Eleena

ARCHITECTURE

'More emphasis on the external areas of the house'

MUTIARA RINI - ONE COCHRANE

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rooms. "Architects and developers must think long term and commit to higher floor-to-floor heights from the start — higher ceilings are often deemed a luxury, not a necessity, and frequently reduced to regulated minimum heights to optimise construction costs in mass housing."

In the new normal, having an isolation room is both practical and necessary in case of infection. "The isolation room should have an ensuite bathroom with good natural ventilation. More easily cleanable interior finishes will simplify sanitising during contagious outbreaks," she says.

A unique design aspect Tay highlights is creating an "airlock with double doors or a small closable vestibule before the main door of the apartment to help isolate the air inside from that in the common corridor in high-density housing to mitigate community transmission during epidemics".

She also stresses that every unit should have an outdoor space. "For new projects, we have been proposing that every housing unit, including the smallest studio, have an outdoor space, even if it is just a standing balcony, to enable the central living dining area to open to the outdoors with full-height sliding doors."

Tay also suggests that developments spread common facilities into several smaller communal spaces, instead of having everything centralised in one area, to discourage crowding. "This enables common facilities to be more easily managed and to continue to be used with sensible SOPs through a pandemic period."

She adds that with the increase in online purchases and deliveries, residential developments should have a "larger receiving facility at the entrance/reception", which will facilitate delivery personnel's entry into the building.

For Eleena, the home designs of the future will see fewer open plan layouts, more outdoor spaces, greater privacy, more use of renewable energy and, if people can afford it, larger homes. "Post-pandemic homes will be less open, with more visual and acoustic separation to allow spaces to be closed off for focused work and online meetings. Additionally, rooms dedicated to office work will be the norm," she says.

"There will be more emphasis on the external areas of the house and their relationship with indoor spaces. More value will be placed on terraces, balconies and roof gardens. These will be places where you can be outside to enjoy nature and exercise without actually being in a public area. Being outdoors in nature will also help improve one's mental health and state of well-being."

"The need for greater privacy will increase with people spending most of their time at home. And spending more free time and working at home means that there will be inevitable increases in water and electricity costs, especially for air-conditioning systems. The desire to reduce higher utility bills will lead people to turn to solar energy, rainwater harvesting systems and so on."

"For those who can afford it, I think the size of houses and apartments will get bigger to accommodate new functions such as home offices, gymnasiums and outdoor living areas."

Tung says his practice's approach has always been to design a home that is "an architectural environment that is interesting, artistic and beautiful". With that in mind, the areas of focus for him and his team are spatial organisation, multigenerational design and health and wellness.

"For spatial organisation, the entrance may be designed to be separate from the main living spaces so that we can leave our shoes, clothing and belongings before entering, rather than carry dirt into the living quarters," he says.

The multigenerational design for homes will be incorporated, considering how people are staying



Above: Living-dining-kitchen multi-function layout in a studio unit can be reconfigured as a study and work area. One Cochrane Condominium by Arkitek MAA.

Right: When privacy is required, a study can be a dedicated area for working from home and a complementary area for relaxation.



Flexibility in space arrangement is the key to future home design, so that the same space can be converted to suit different functions at different times."

— Ezumi

at home more, which is a good choice for the family, Tung believes.

Moreover, spaces that promote health and wellness will be included in the plans and design. "The introduction of community roof lounges, gardens that enable house owners to interact with each other and nature will be essential. The environment can stimulate our senses and green species can help manage mental health," he says.

"With an extended indoor stay, the interaction with external spaces will be limited. We can look at designs that offer large windows with views, making space for greenery indoors, or simply by creating a sense of calmness through proper light-

ing and natural colours or materials. It can also be extended to eco-friendly and organic material selection. It can be as simple as raw materials such as bamboo, timber and low VOC (volatile organic compounds) paint, which are comfortable and healthy."

The pandemic has made us relook the way we use the spaces in our homes to embrace the new normal. Some of the ideas presented include having more flexible spaces, better access to the outdoors while being indoors, and multigenerational house design. While it may take some time before the pandemic ends, one thing is for certain: there is no place like home. **E**

Sime Darby Property focuses on green features and sustainability

PICTURES BY SIME DARBY PROPERTY

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent iterations of Movement Control Order have caused many homebuyers to rethink what they need in a home. As the trend of work from home (WFH) is expected to continue in the post-pandemic period, Sime Darby Property Bhd (SDP) group managing director Datuk Azmir Merican reckons that for many people, home is now more than just a space to live in — it is also a place for work, leisure and learning.

“It is understandable that some families may feel the constraint of space in their current homes ... there is not enough space to simultaneously accommodate two working adults, who may need separate rooms for virtual meetings, and children, who need their personal spot for e-learning. Also, there may be a requirement for a larger space to cultivate newfound hobbies such as gardening and fitness routines,” he tells *City & Country*.

He believes some of the things homeowners are looking for are larger built-ups, better ventilation, easy convenience to receive parcels and deliveries, as well as minimal exposure to common areas such as elevators, receptions and lobbies.

SDP has seen strong demand for its landed properties in suburban townships. Its landed homes in City of Elmina, Bandar Bukit Raja and Serenia City achieved take-up rates of 90% to 100% in 2020 and 1H2021 during their weekend launches.

The developer recorded total sales of RM630.2 million in 1QFY2021 and is on course to meet its sales target of RM2.4 billion for the current financial year. Azmir believes there is still good demand for landed residential properties at the right price point and locations.

On the changing market needs, he notes that SDP has redesigned its homes to address the issues of health, wellness and space in the post-pandemic era while also focusing on green features and sustainability.

More flexible spaces

The redesign was done by incorporating more flexible spaces within the home, optimising the layout to maximise functional spaces, as well as improving air circulation and allowing more natural light in.

The redesign can be seen in homes in Elmina Green Four in City of Elmina, Serenia Aiora in Serenia City and Alura in Bandar Bukit Raja, all of which offer freehold two-storey landed properties. The bedroom on the ground floor can be used as a home office, children’s playroom, bedroom for the elderly or hobby space. And the space under the staircase and the family room on the first floor can be converted into study or hobby areas.

Elmina Green Four’s two-storey link homes in City of Elmina have large windows for maximum ventilation. The spacious and easy-split kitchen means the owner can have separate dry and wet kitchens. The units come with security grilles, built-in air-conditioning piping, water filter, instant water heater and booster pump, as well as one-year free high-speed broadband.

As for the homes at Serenia Aiora, located on one of the highest points in Serenia City, they are designed with the health and wellness of residents in mind. The units at Serenia Aiora have a double-volume family area that can be converted into a home office, with the option of adding a mezzanine floor.

The open-plan design for living, dining and kitchen space gives residents the flexibility of choosing their preferred layout. Each unit also has a 23ft car porch, which can easily fit larger cars. There is extra land of 1m in the back of the house that can be used for home extension or gardening activities.



Above: Some completed units in Bandar Bukit Raja



SIME DARBY PROPERTY

It is understandable that some families may feel the constraint of space in their current homes.”
— Azmir



Left: An artist's impression of Serenia Aiora units



Below: An artist's impression of Elmina Green Four units

The units at Alura, Bandar Bukit Raja, are designed for young families. They feature an open-plan layout for living, dining and kitchen space and a spacious car porch. The columnless and seamless design allows for optimum space utilisation and an unobstructed view.

The space at the back of the house is more than 13ft and can be used for gardening activities or as a children’s play area or an outdoor gym. It can also be utilised for future extensions and renovations.

Green features and sustainability

Besides meeting changing market needs, SDP has also introduced green and energy-efficient features in its products as more time spent indoors may

lead to an increase in household energy usage.

“Our townships are designed to include a variety of sustainable features, beyond the mandated requirement of 10% green. An example is Elmina West within the 6,500-acre City of Elmina township. It has over 20% green and blue space, which includes parks and buffers, inclusive of the recreational wetland retention area,” Azmir says.

“We have signed an MoU with TNBx, a subsidiary of Tenaga Nasional Bhd, to provide solar photovoltaic (PV) panels to 513 residential units at Ilham Residence in City of Elmina. We want to make solar PV panels either a standard feature or one that is offered at our other townships, in line with our strategy to lead in sustainable technology solutions.”

S P S E T I A

S P Setia remains agile and flexible

Businesses have had to change and adapt due to the pandemic, including embracing the work from home (WFH) practice as well as adopting technology and its related infrastructure to ensure minimal disruption.

S P Setia Bhd president and CEO Datuk Khor Chap Jen reckons that it is important for businesses to always be agile in the face of challenges and changes. This health crisis has forced businesses to be radically more digital, accelerating the pace of innovation.

Khor notes that governments' instructions for people to WFH have pushed many businesses to move quickly towards technological solutions. Tools that usually take years to be adopted, such as cloud services and virtual reality, are fast becoming essential resources for many businesses.

"As the pandemic unfolds, we are experiencing its effects in every aspect of our lives, but we are adapting ... The brick-and-mortar industry, which is usually held back by traditional methods, now makes decisions and takes action virtually. All these changes rely on agility, and S P Setia has had a lot of experience with this in the past four decades. We have overcome many challenges and emerged stronger and more resilient," he tells *City & Country*.

The developer embarked on its digital transformation journey in 2019, establishing a future-proof digital platform and infrastructure for a better user experience for its customers and employees.

Thus, since the pandemic broke out, it has been quick to roll out digital initiatives such as virtual property expo Setia Virtual-X, mobile app Setia On The Go as well as a WhatsApp Business module for all business units to connect and communicate with its existing and potential homebuyers.

New meaning to homes

The health crisis has caused many people to view their homes differently, Khor observes. This attitude has resulted in homebuyers' changing needs for space, infrastructure and sustainable living.

"Usually treated as a basic necessity where we can rest after a long day at work, the home has now taken on a new meaning for many. It is a place where we can find safety and security from the virus as well as a conducive place to have official meetings and do our work," he says.

"Many are considering upgrading their homes to accommodate the WFH lifestyle ... A dedicated work area is now a need for those looking to upgrade or purchase their first home. Evidently, even when the pandemic is under control, many businesses may still opt for a hybrid working model as part of their sustainability strategy and reducing business continuity risk."

The increasing trend of work, study, connecting and entertainment from home also means that related infrastructure and data connectivity have become mandatory features in homes. It also includes the need for dedicated spaces for these activities. S P Setia has also heard homebuyers' requests for outdoor greenery and landscaping in their homes where they can take a break from work and study.

Khor notes that the company's development philosophy of "LiveLearnWorkPlay" fits the changing needs of homebuyers.

"It is part of our design DNA to accommodate these evolving needs in the layout plans of the homes and the landscape around them. Proper landscaping is crucial because it contributes significantly to our well-being and quality of life. Living within pleasing and culturally meaningful landscapes enhances our sense of well-being," he says.



It is part of our design DNA to accommodate these evolving needs in the layout plans of the homes and the landscape around them." — Khor

Artist's impressions of a Glades of Westlake bungalow (right), and its living and dining room



Moon Bridge and clubhouse (below) in Glades of Westlake in Setia Eco Glades



"What this means is that people are also turning the 'stay at home' orders and availability of technology into an opportunity to work on their well-being and help them deal with new levels of anxiety. It means new habits are being cultivated and, most probably, the routine will continue post-pandemic. For example, trainers and fitness professionals are taking their classes online and, for many, a gym corner has become a great addition to the home."



Sustainable living

The pandemic has also elevated homebuyers' awareness of sustainability, giving a new interpretation to what sustainable living means. S P Setia's sustainability charter, "Building sustainable communities for all", and its development philosophy have formed the cornerstones of the master plans of its developments.

Khor believes a self-sustained township is one with well-planned infrastructure, facilities and amenities within easy reach as well as optimal utilisation of natural resources. The developer strives to achieve sustainable living in its developments by reducing its carbon footprint.

"One way for us to be part of a sustainable ecosystem is to live in self-sustained, eco-friendly townships that efficiently and conveniently offer what is needed. One of these developments is Glades of Westlake in Setia Eco Glades, Cyberjaya, where a third of the total land area is a dedicated Green Zone," he says.

"Families and communities can spend time with their family and loved ones surrounded by nature. The home is built on wellness and balances the need for outdoor spaces and indoor comforts. Ample pocket areas are available for gardening, barbecues, patio dining and even camping."

Glades of Westlake homes feature an open floor plan, offering the flexibility to change the function of the space, such as a gym area, work corner and children's study area. Each home is equipped with high-speed broadband connection, smart home infrastructure for future upgrades, and recycling systems such as rainwater harvesting and solar-powered hot water systems.

A stone's throw away from the development is an exclusive hammock clubhouse offering F&B and sports facilities. The clubhouse can serve up to 160 homes. Within the vicinity, there are other facilities such as The Koi canal, Moon Bridge and Lotus Pond to provide fauna and flora for the enjoyment of residents. They can also exercise or go for a walk at the nearby Chi Garden. **E**

Keeping design efficiency in mind

Many of us have probably never spent this much time at home nor did we imagine working from home would become part of the new normal. A home is not only a shelter but also a place to exercise, work and play, and this is where SkyWorld Development Sdn Bhd keeps design efficiency in mind — by developing products that suit the needs and wants of buyers.

“We view the pandemic as an opportunity for us to invest in research and development (R&D), focus more on innovation and relook at our products as well as the built environment for future homes post-pandemic,” says SkyWorld deputy CEO Lee Chee Seng.

In this pandemic, there have been difficulties in executing projects, owing to travel restrictions. “Thus, we have been marketing our products via digital platforms, such as conducting the sales presentations of our properties via Zoom and Facebook, and providing a virtual reality experience for prospective buyers to view the show units,” says Lee.

“We will focus on creating functional and flexible layouts for natural light and ventilation to promote a healthy lifestyle. The additional bedroom can be used as a bedroom or converted into a home office, music or study room.”

Lee adds that antibacterial and antiviral functional building materials were also used in SkyWorld’s projects for health and safety purposes.

An example is one of its projects in Setapak: Bennington Residences @ SkyArena, which was handed over in 2019. The 2.69-acre project offers 580 units in two 40-storey towers; they are available in five different layouts with built-ups of 1,092 to 1,570 sq ft. These units have at least three bedrooms and two bathrooms and boast flexible layouts as well as spacious lanai balconies with wide Juliet windows, thereby integrating indoor and outdoor living.

The developer offers keyless access, where residents only need to scan their phones at the entrance to enter the building, says Lee. “Different kinds of functional facilities will be provided to improve residents’ well-being. We will also feature a water filtration system in our projects, which will remove unwanted impurities from water such as sediment, taste and odour, as well as bacteria for better quality water. Parcel lockers will be provided for contactless package and food deliveries.”

In terms of health and wellness, Lee points out that The Valley Residences @ SkySierra in Setiawangsa will offer more than 60 lifestyle facilities, including three workout areas — a power MMA gym, cross fit gym and an outdoor gym — that cater for residents from all walks of life, from the young to the elderly. As for the RM2.9 billion SkyArena in Setapak, the project comprises three residential and one commercial component. Its main feature is its 9.4-acre sports complex completed in 2020, and offers comprehensive sports facilities such as an Olympic-size swimming pool, scuba diving, board diving, indoor futsal, indoor rock climbing, a sports medical centre and a café.

SkyVogue Residences

A recent project, SkyVogue Residences, has a modern and minimalist concept that aims to create simple and uncluttered spaces. Simplicity, clean lines and monochromatic colours will be used as an accent in both the façade of the building and interior design of the units, where functional and versatile spaces are the main focus.

Launched on March 5 and slated for completion in 2024, the project is 72% taken up. It has a gross development value of RM273 million and sits on a 1.34-acre leasehold parcel adjacent to Armada Villa in Taman Desa, Kuala Lumpur.

The low-density condominium will have only 11 units per floor and comprise a total of 333 residential units in a 45-storey block. “There will be

Units at SkyVogue Residences will have an abundance of natural light and be well ventilated



SkyVogue Residences, which has a GDV of RM273 million, comprises a total of 333 units

MOHD SHAHRIN YAHYA/THE EDGE



“We will focus on creating functional and flexible layouts for natural light and ventilation to promote a healthy lifestyle.”
— Lee

785 parking bays and the typical and special units will be entitled to two to three parking lots, while the duplexes and penthouses will have five to six parking lots each. Other features of the project will include parcel lockers and electric-vehicle charging stations,” says Lee.

The typical and special units will come in layouts of 3- or 3+1-bedroom and a study and have built-ups ranging from 1,085 to 1,940 sq ft. The 3+2- or 4+2-bedroom duplexes will have built-ups of 1,970 to 2,285 sq ft; and the 4+2- or 5+2-bedroom penthouses will measure 2,195 to 2,650 sq ft. Priced from RM650,000, all units will be fitted with hot water storage tanks.

Units at SkyVogue Residences will have an abundance of natural light and be well ventilated, says Lee. “There will be sliding louvres at the balcony to reduce heat into the units, and the louvres can be moved in either direction, allowing for a change in façade design. So far, most of our buyers are Chinese aged between 20 and 70 and reside mainly in Taman Desa, Seputeh and Petaling Jaya.”

According to the developer, SkyVogue Residences is the first residential project in the country to use the Destination Control System. “The DCS is a lift control system that interprets residents’ data stored in our SkyWorld Connects app, which is a mobile application for effective and efficient communication between SkyWorld residents, its management and the security team, and will assign lifts to take them to their respective floors. This will help reduce the waiting time and minimise the number of intermediate stops,” Lee explains.

The project has also implemented a Seamless Mobile Access System (SMAS), adds Lee, which is integrated with DCS and is an entry system that uses the Bluetooth technology found in residents’ mobile phones to transmit their data to a Bluetooth reader installed at the entry point of the development’s boom gate entry, lobby main entrance, lift lobby and facility areas, and will ultimately reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection. A physical access card will be provided for those who may not have

their phones with them or when their phones are not usable.

SkyVogue Residences is Qlassic (Quality Assessment System in Construction) and Green Building Index (GBI) compliant. Lee highlights that an Automated Waste Collection System (AWCS) has been included in the development, whereby rubbish thrown into the garbage chute will be sucked into the trash centre on the ground floor. “This system, which uses suction, is more hygienic and eliminates pest infestations in the waste storage area. It is different from the conventional type of just throwing the rubbish into the bin at the trash chute, which will smell if it is not cleaned frequently and properly.

“We have used AWCS in most of our projects, as the concealed disposal of waste provides cleaner surroundings. With this system in place, security is also enhanced because there will be less of a need for sanitary workers to go to the refuse chambers on each floor. As a result, this will be able to boost the health and comfort of residents,” adds Lee.

The development will offer more than 30 facilities, such as an infinity lap pool, a wading pool, Jacuzzi, an aqua lounge, a forest garden, herb garden, garden gazebo, fitness park, games hall, multipurpose court, family pavilion, a yoga room, sky gymnasium, sky terrace and sky barbecue area. The monthly maintenance fee, including sinking fund, is 35 sen psf.

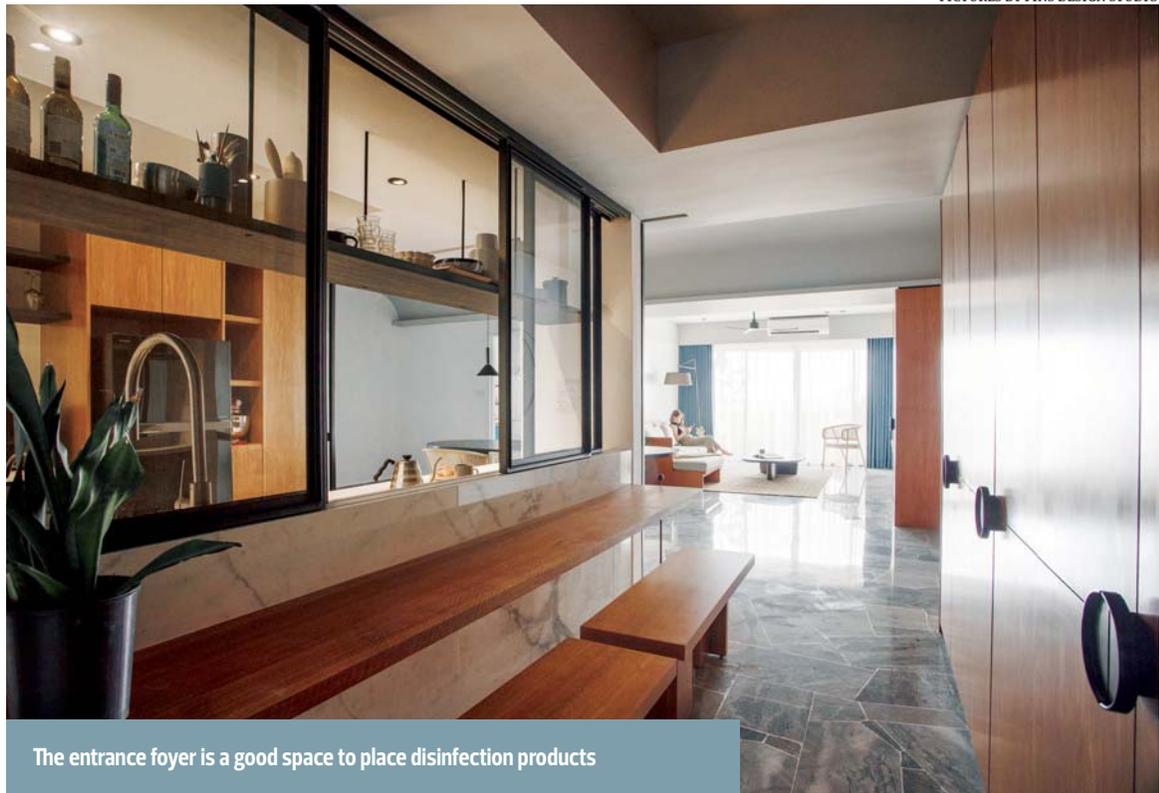
SkyVogue Residences is strategically located, says Lee. “It has a central location and is easily accessible via the Smart Tunnel, Maju Expressway, East-West Link Expressway, Kuala Lumpur-Seremban Highway, Federal Highway and Sprint Highway. It is also near Mid Valley Megamall, The Gardens Mall, KL Eco City, Bandar Malaysia, Vikas International School, Kuen Cheng High School, Taman Desa Medical Centre and Assunta Hospital,” he says.

The project is also included in the government’s Home Ownership Campaign, which has been extended until Dec 31 this year. As such, buyers are entitled to benefits such as stamp duty exemptions on the sale and purchase and loan agreements. **E**

INTERIOR DESIGN

Redefining interior spaces for future well-being

PICTURES BY PINS DESIGN STUDIO



The entrance foyer is a good space to place disinfection products

BY HANNAH RAFFEE
city.country@bizedge.com

Rich or monochromatic hues? Light or dark marbled countertops? While such design cues remain pertinent, interior spaces — and their functionality — are being reimagined to suit the current pandemic climate.

Take Architectural Digest, for example, which features actress Hilary Duff's "quarantine hang space" cabana, located in the backyard of her remodelled Georgian-style home, with chairs placed "six feet apart so we can have friends over".

While priorities may be different now, the common denominator remains — after having gone through several versions of lockdown, we want to enhance our personal space to ensure our physical and mental well-being.

Here we take a closer look at changes in requirements and fads, and ask two local award-winning design firms to share their views and tips on how to improve the design of our homes.



With space planning, children can have a comfortable, conducive environment, especially for remote home learning

FOCUS ON THE FUNCTIONAL, COMFORTABLE AND FASHIONABLE

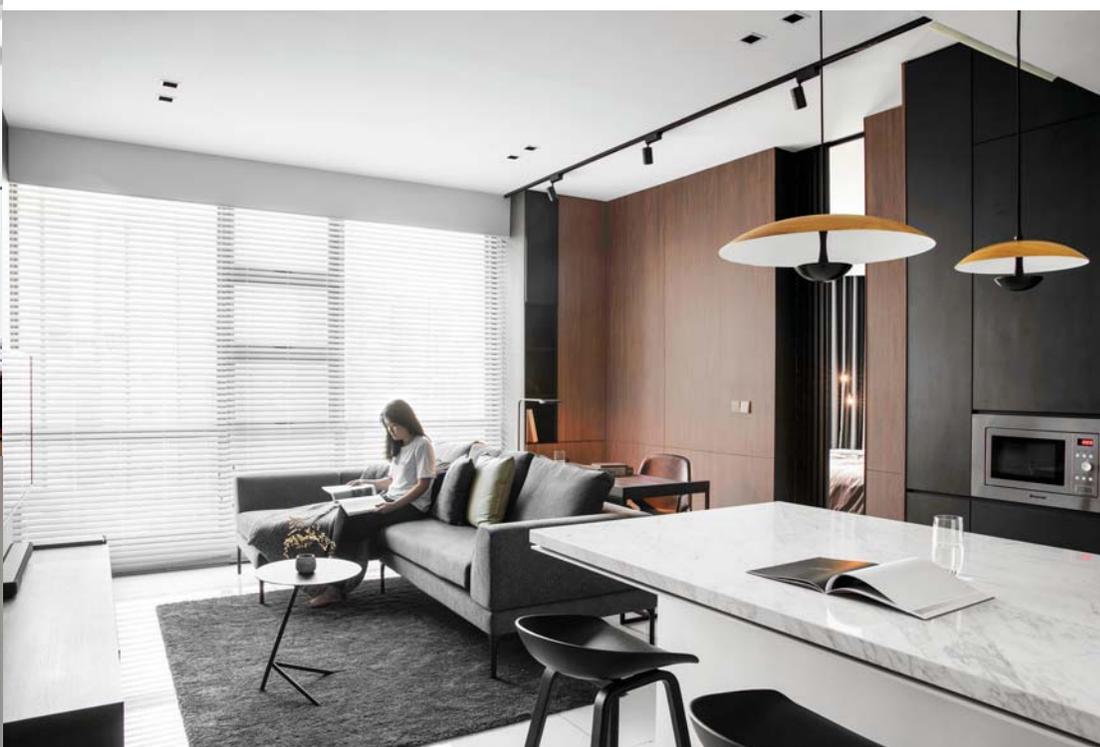
According to Petaling Jaya-based design firm PINS Design Studio Sdn Bhd (PINS Studio), the pandemic has changed its clients' needs. Director Yu Xuan says in an email, "Our consumers have started to focus more on furnishings that are functional, comfortable, fashionable yet workable and convenient [for their spaces]."

A recipient of the A'Design Award Italy 2021 and Qanvast Design Award 2021, among other accolades, PINS Studio highlights the importance of personal spaces at home and how the pandemic has influenced our lifestyle and daily habits. Director Si Yuan says, "In terms of requirements, there is a need for better dining space, kitchen, permanent workspace, storage space and study area, among others. During this time, some of us have picked up new habits and hobbies such as gardening, cooking and exercising and hence, have allocated space for this."

The firm maintains that it is crucial for designers and homeowners to think ahead, in case the pandemic becomes endemic. Director Bii Kun says, "We need to think about the possibility post-endemic and our needs then. Designs have to be more diversified to accommodate the homeowners and the current situation; there may be a need for a safe isolation area in our home in the future. Perhaps this is something we should all consider."

From left: Yu Xuan, Si Yuan and Bii Kun





The living room is an ideal space for interchangeable functions

PINS Studio, which specialises in private, residential homes, provides a few key tips for homeowners:

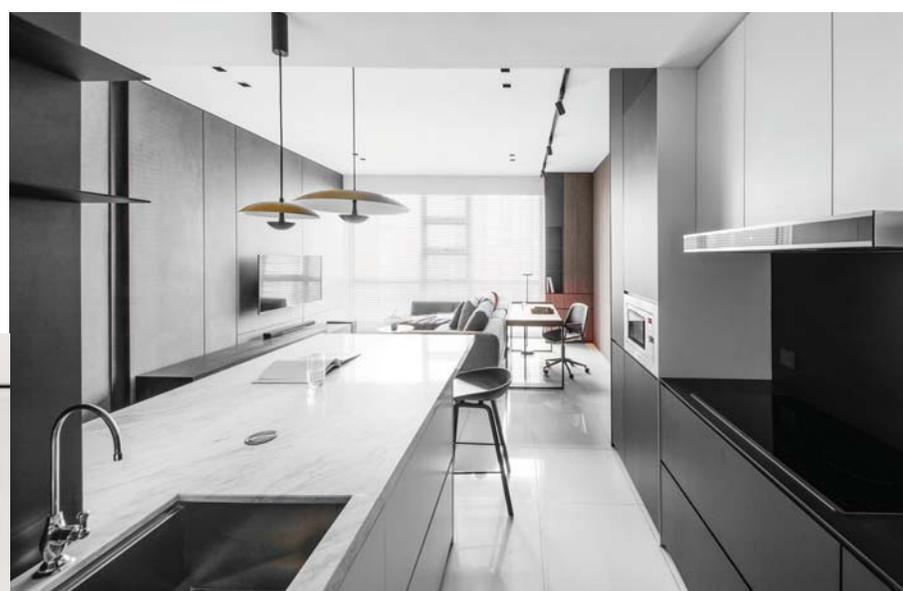
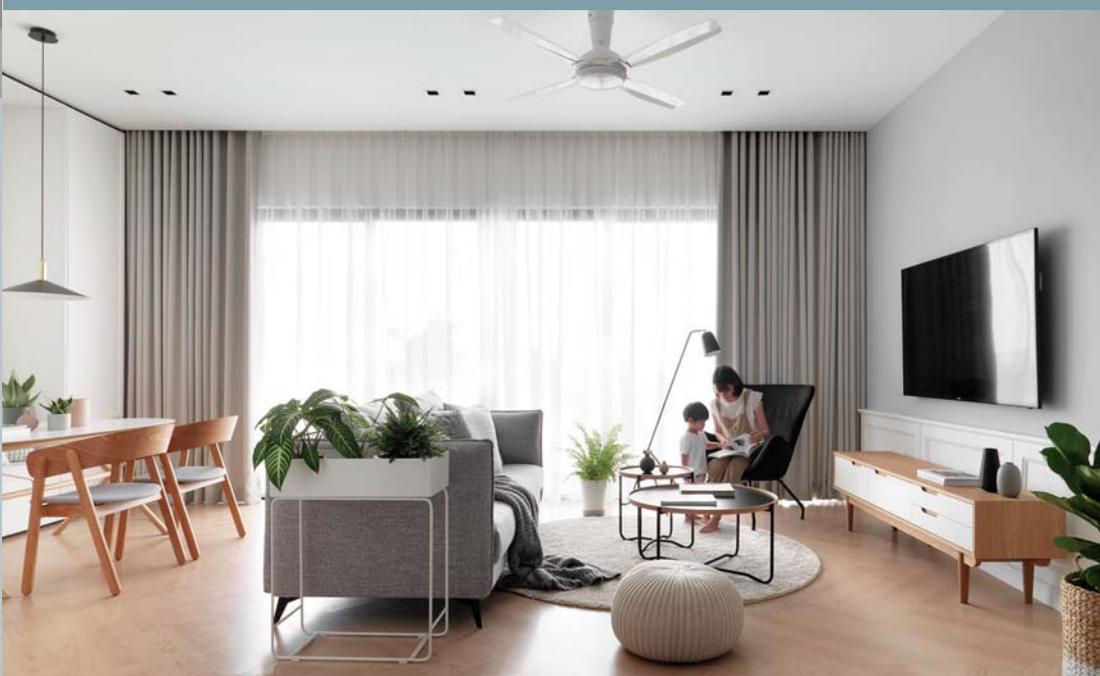
1 Disinfection equipment and improved ventilation: Air purifiers and sanitary products are becoming daily necessities. These could be smartly integrated into our spaces. Meanwhile, natural ventilation is key during this time. For poorly ventilated spaces, homeowners may have to consider installing a mechanical ventilation system.

2 Entrance foyer to be decked with disinfection equipment: The entrance foyer is a good space for disinfection products — wet wipes and alcohol sprays — that may require a good storage space. It is also a good space to install a handwashing station.

3 Flexibility of living rooms: The living room is an ideal space for interchangeable functions. For homeowners with small spaces, they can even consider “giving up” this room and replacing it with a core area for the family. The living room can also be integrated with other functional spaces for dining and entertainment.

4 An upgraded kitchen: With people staying home more, they tend to cook more often. The kitchen must have enough storage, open spaces and a good relationship [with the other spaces such as the dining area] to improve the overall user experience.

5 Children’s safety: Space planning is crucial for common spaces such as the living room, so that children can have a safer, more comfortable and conducive environment [especially for remote home learning].



The kitchen must have enough storage and open spaces



INTERIOR DESIGN

Forward, inspired design trends

FROM PAGE 25

MAKING HOMES MORE COMFORTABLE AND PRACTICAL

Contemporary, award-winning design firm IQI Concept Sdn Bhd has been concentrating on improving the overall health and mental health of its clients through design. Managing director Ho Han Boon says in an email, “Apart from physical health and wellness, we are also looking into the mental well-being of our clients. We [study] the clients’ lifestyle when they are at home.

“We zoom in on their lifestyle and activities outside of their home, such as their profession and work environment. The pandemic has certainly redefined the concept of a home, creating new needs and with that, the demand for different solutions.

“Moving forward, we believe people will continue to stay indoors as much as possible and practise social distancing post-pandemic. Clients are looking for new ways to make their home more comfortable and practical. In terms of space planning and functionality, hygiene will be important to reduce virus and bacteria contamination — for example, reducing flat surfaces where germs can be found or improving the ventilation system.”

IQI Concept, which has an extensive portfolio of residential, commercial, retail and F&B projects, shares a few ideas with homeowners:

1 Resort-inspired design: Due to travel restrictions and lockdowns, there is a surge in requests for resort-feel designs, which can transform homes into retreats (with nature elements). To achieve this, homebuyers can renovate their bathrooms to create a spa-like atmosphere with hotel-style facilities and finishes.

2 Smart technologies: In the future, households may include self-cleaning technology, UV lights, and antimicrobial or germ-resistant materials for floors and tiles. Voice control is also being looked into more seriously in order to reduce surface contact.

3 Blending with nature: Biophilic design is gaining popularity, such as vertical gardens, indoor terraces, skylights and large windows. It incorporates greenery, brings more natural light into a home and improves air quality.

4 Dedicated home offices: There has to be an allocated, quiet zone separate from other spaces to reply emails, manage documents and for online meetings. Other suggestions for an effective home office include storage solutions for files and other work essentials, and a sound-proofing system to reduce noise and disturbances.

5 Colours as mood boosters: Different hues in design can be included in your fittings and furnishings to improve the overall living environment during lockdowns and the pandemic. Shades of blue, white, light wood and terracotta are popular to create a soothing environment to promote well-being. To brighten up a space, strategically placed accessories and accents in bright, cheery tones can be utilised.

PICTURES BY IQI CONCEPT



Ho says clients are looking for new ways to make their home more practical



Homebuyers can renovate their bathrooms to create a spa-like atmosphere



Above: To brighten up a space, strategically placed accessories and accents in bright, cheery tones can be utilised

Below: Home offices may include storage solutions for files as well as sound-proofing systems to reduce noise



Biophilic designs with skylights and large windows are becoming more popular



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MATRIX CONCEPTS

Matrix Concepts embraces changing with the times

The notion of home has changed along with the demands of living amid a pandemic such as working from home and remote learning. Matrix Concepts Holdings Bhd has been quick to recognise the shifting landscape and is banking on new features to cater for its target market.

In an email interview, Matrix Concepts chief marketing officer Lim Kok Yee says, "It is undeniable that what we perceived as our home, where it used to be a sanctuary or place of rest and refuge, has changed entirely to a multipurpose abode due to the pandemic."

He points out that the pandemic has seen a change in its target market's preferences. "Our work and our children's schooling needs have encroached into our home space, and that requires a lot of changes, be it our perceptions and our daily lifestyle, since it means being confined together 24/7."

Lim adds, "We are anticipating what comes next, and how we adapt to these changes and market demands, as well as the constraints during these trying times, will test our agility as a property developer and builder. We need to quickly look at what our customers need and want now, and the community as a whole — the space and common areas as well as the practical aspects, including infrastructure, security and digital connectivity."

According to him, the pandemic has created a paradigm shift among developers in terms of the ideal home and value-add lifestyle concepts. "The market is demanding more. What was a priority two years ago is now at the bottom of the ladder," he says.

Based on its market research and analysis, Matrix Concepts will focus more on the value for money and affordable housing segment, which means homes in the mid-range of RM300,000 to RM600,000 and the affordable range of RM299,999 and below.

Lim says, "Our target market will be the upgraders among professionals, managers, executives and businessmen (PMEBs) as well as young families. The industry and the whole economy have been greatly affected and we are not out of the woods yet due to the rising number of daily infection cases."

"We need to upgrade our offerings, especially in terms of digital connectivity, infrastructure and materials used, as well as optimum space usage for work, school and family downtime, which will involve practical and functional designing and planning. Security is also important and community spaces will have to evolve with the many concerns to look into, particularly health and safety."

Amping up safety features in Bayu Sutera

Matrix Concepts plans to incorporate these features in its upcoming launches. "A good example is our Bayu Sutera development in Bandar Sri Sendayan [township]. Bayu Sutera will have a guard post, security and perimeter fencing, including its own Pondok Rukun Tetangga and CCTV surveillance for the peace of mind and safety of its residents," says Lim.



Above: Upgraded offerings such as digital connectivity and security will be incorporated in the 216-acre Bayu Sutera

Right: Bayu Sutera will be anchored by a 9.5-acre central park, among other green facilities



"We need to upgrade our offerings, especially in terms of digital connectivity, infrastructure and materials used, as well as optimum space usage for work, school and family downtime, which will involve practical and functional designing and planning."
— Lim

Bayu Sutera will comprise 2,043 residential units, with built-ups starting from 2,142 sq ft

"The changes made in the project's offerings such as the guardhouse complete with intercom system and boom gates, although our projects are non-stratified [non-gated and guarded], have addressed the safety and well-being concerns of our residents."

The 216-acre Bayu Sutera has a gross development value (GDV) of about RM1 billion. The development comprises 2,043 residential units with built-ups and layouts starting from 2,142 sq ft.

"The upcoming launch will be Precinct 2B, which will comprise 325 double-storey terraced homes. It is scheduled to be launched this month and the target completion date is in November 2022. For Precinct 2B, the prices of the units are from RM529,999 (RM247 psf) onwards," says Lim, adding that there will be four precincts in Bayu Sutera.

Anchored by a 9.5-acre central park for common usage, each residential parcel in Bayu Sutera will have its own playpark that comes with a playground, parcourse, badminton courts, walkway, reflexology paths, terraced bench, pavilion and lawn.

Bayu Sutera is part of the Bandar Sri Sendayan township in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. The 6,272-acre township has a total GDV of about RM5.2 billion and will comprise 11,400 residential and commercial units, with an estimated population of 40,000 people.

Lim stresses the importance of the elements of nature in a development amid the pandemic. "We strongly believe that a community with good parks and other facilities is a pleasant and sociable place to live, with a lively outdoor and cultural life. Residents spend more time in the community, and therefore are more familiar with one another

and contribute to a sense of community."

Meanwhile, the township offers various amenities such as Nusari Biz, Sendayan Merchant Square, Sendayan MetroPark, SJK (T) Bandar Sri Sendayan, Matrix Global Schools, SJK (C) Bandar Sri Sendayan, SK Bandar Sri Sendayan, d'tempat Country Club, X-Park Sendayan, Carnelian Park, Klinik Kesihatan Sendayan, Columbia Asia Hospital

and KPJ Seremban Specialist Hospital.

Matrix Concepts plans to forge ahead with its strategies amid the times. "The downturn of the economy was anticipated two years ago and we had a contingency plan, including our organisation's digital transformation. We were prepared in a way, and that plan has undergone numerous changes and approaches as we adapt to the times," says Lim.

"Overall, the group's transformation towards digitalisation has benefited our associates by being mentally prepared and keeping their health in check. Due to the lockdowns, Movement Control Order (MCO) and Enhanced MCO periods, construction has been put on hold and it is worrying for our many associates out there including our workers."

"Initiatives have been put in place to hasten the vaccination programme for all our associates, foreign workers, supply chain contractors and providers as well as our associates' immediate family members through the government's public-private partnership immunisation programme (Pikas) and the Construction Industry Development Board's (CIDB) programmes."

The group is prudent about its future plans. "For FY2022, we are cautiously optimistic about the recovery of the industry. However, the whole nation must work towards the health of our economy," he says.

"Moving forward, we will have a few upcoming launches [in Negeri Sembilan] such as Bayu Sutera, Laman Sendayan, Tiara Sendayan, Resort Residence and Resort Villa. These will be targeted between 3Q2021 and 1Q2022, which will be from July 2021 to March 2022." **E**



SUNWAY

Accessibility and self-sufficiency key in post-pandemic era

Rather than just a place to go back to and rest, homes are now used for everything from cooking, eating and socialising to studying and working.

Sunway Bhd central region property development division executive director Chong Sau Min has observed a shift in buyers' preferences since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdowns.

"Physical restrictions have highlighted more than ever the importance of self-sufficiency. In the post-pandemic era, accessibility and self-sufficiency are key.

"People now have a renewed realisation about why they need conveniences nearby as well as easy access to an uninterrupted supply of healthy food", he adds.

Chong says integrated developments in convenient neighbourhoods are preferred as they offer better community living and lifestyle support. "[Developments in] peripheral locations with great connectivity offer new homeowners all the benefits of the city centre but with a lower investment and less congestion."

In addition, homeownership has become a priority as people now see their homes as a place for everything, he says. "Younger Malaysians are looking for convenience and space to support their own lifecycle transitions and plans for multigenerational living as well as for investment.

"There is a demand for more space, especially for those with families, as people are spending more time at home. Ample outdoor space is also preferred as people now prefer to spend time outdoors where physical distancing can be observed, and activities can contribute to better physical, mental and emotional health."

Chong adds that co-working space is also an important feature for those in the gig economy as well as those who need a quiet workspace away from their family.

As such, property developers need to keep their eye on changing preferences, he says. "We believe that consumer-centric developers who can provide valuable end-to-end service, from quality homes to financing and quality property management, can win the hearts of increasingly value-conscious buyers.

According to him, Sunway Property, which has always put customer-centricity at the core of its business, is watching these new preferences very closely using analytics.

Synergy and sustainable design

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the group's property development arm Sunway Property has leaned more heavily on the synergies among the business units within Sunway Group, which include construction, healthcare, education and innovation, to drive advancement.



An artist's impression of the co-working space at Sunway Velocity TWO

An artist's impression of Sunway Belfield in Kuala Lumpur, one of Sunway Property's latest offerings



KENNY YAP/THE EDGE

“People now have a renewed realisation about why they need conveniences nearby as well as easy access to an uninterrupted supply of healthy food.”
– Chong



PICTURES BY SUNWAY

In terms of design, Sunway Property's homes are configured for maximum daylight and air flow, and its developments incorporate facilities that promote physical, mental and emotional health.

"We are focusing on community-based lifestyle support to ensure mental and emotional wellbeing for residents, such as commercial areas that will have F&B options and retail once physical distancing is lifted," says Chong.

Sunway Property is also incorporating more green features in its developments to fulfil the rising awareness for sustainability. Its aim is to have all its developments certified green eventually. "Sustainable designs — such as with public transportation network amenities — save purchasers time and money and reduce stress. Car-free mobility in the neighbourhood also provides for better outdoor air quality."

The Sunway Property Management app helps residents reduce physical contact while streamlining efficiency. "We utilise technology to deliver speed and efficiency for hassle-free services as efficient property management is key to ensuring the communities' safety."

Keeping abreast of changing preferences

Sunway Property has addressed changing consumer preferences in its latest offerings such as Sunway d'hill Residences in Kota Damansara, Sunway Artessa in Wangsa Maju, Sunway Velocity TWO in Cheras, Sunway Belfield in Kuala Lumpur, and Jernih Residence in Kajang.

Most of these developments come with separate dry and wet kitchens to cater for more cooking at home, as well as a co-working space for the convenience of those working from home and in anticipation of a future hybrid work environment and rise in the gig economy.

Sunway Property has also made provisions for green and open spaces at its developments. For example, Sunway d'hill Residences will have 2.77 acres of green open space, making up 42.8% of its landscape coverage. This is in addition to the project being situated next to the Kota Damansara Community Forest Reserve.

"Living close to forest environments helps to reduce stress and promote better mental and emotional health, which have been the key focus during the pandemic," says Chong, adding that rooms are also designed to face the green spaces so they receive ample natural daylight and ventilation.

The developer has also invested in beautifying the 15-acre public lake next to its Sunway Serene development in Kelana Jaya, Petaling Jaya. "We have transformed it from a waste pond into a scenic community lake. It is suitable for community and recreational activities. We have also built a 1.2km jogging track by the lake for the enjoyment of residents as well as the public," says Chong.

Sunway Serene and Sunway Belfield also offer bigger units, or "semi-Ds and bungalows in the sky", for better ventilation and privacy, he adds.

In addition, dual-key unit layouts are available at Sunway Serene and Sunway Velocity TWO. "Owners can opt to convert part of the unit into a home office space," Chong says.

Sunway Property prioritises easy access to amenities for its communities. Sunway Velocity TWO, for example, is directly linked to the Sunway Velocity integrated development and has easy access to the one million sq ft mall, education and commercial hubs, ample F&B options as well as three MRT and two LRT stations.

As for Sunway Serene, the development is located close to Sunway City Kuala Lumpur and near the Setia Jaya BRT and KTM stations. It will offer facilities such as a 24-hour care centre supported by Sunway Medical Centre. "Certified nurses will be stationed at the care centre to meet the health needs of the residents at their doorstep."

Sunway Artessa is linked by a walkway to the Sri Rampai LRT station, while Jernih Residence is located within a mature township and just 50m from the nearest MRT station. Sunway d'hill Residences will be integrated with retail shops, Chong adds.

Its developments also incorporate features that help to reduce physical contact. For example, Sunway d'hill Residences will have an RFID-enabled long-range card access system at the guardhouse, dedicated car wash bays and community management apps.

"Much design thought has also been put in to ensure convenience for food and parcel delivery. A PopBox (automated parcel locker) will be located near the lobby and mailrooms (at Sunway d'hill Residences)," he says.

In line with its aim of having more certified green developments, both Sunway d'hill Residences and Jernih Residence are GreenRE certified. "This attests to energy and water efficiency, the indoor environment and sustainability through the use of environmentally friendly materials," says Chong. **E**

MAH SING GROUP

Shifting the focus from product to people

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, “placemaking” was both a design aspiration and buzzword in marketing speak. The approach, which serves to create public spaces that bring together the community as well as the cultural, social and economic aspects, may be less popular today, owing to the pandemic and the many lockdowns we are having.

Mah Sing Group Bhd chief design officer Kevin Lew says placemaking is no longer relevant, as private spaces are now preferred over public places. “This so-called community or public participation is replaced by a smaller group or even individuals.”

“Homemaking” has become the new buzzword, Lew says. “Houses have become homes and spaces have become more personal. It is about the making of a home rather than the building of a house. It has become more personal, confined and versatile.”

Lew adds that the “homemaking” initiative is reflected in Mah Sing’s latest campaigns this year: Home with Mah Sing and Come Home 2 Mah Sing.

“As a result of the shift from placemaking to homemaking, Mah Sing has switched its perception from product-centric to people-centric. As a developer, we are champions of developing the right product at the right price for the right market. Owing to the current crisis of the pandemic and lockdowns, however, it is not market sentiment that has deteriorated, but people.

“Economic confidence, society’s well-being and personal welfare have had a major impact on the property market slowdown. Unemployment, bank loan valuation and healthcare crisis are the stumbling blocks before even thinking about a new home purchase,” he says.

Thus, Mah Sing hopes that switching its focus from being product-centric to being people-centric will help in assisting and addressing the welfare concerns of its new customers, whether on affordable market prices, getting correct valuation analysis and financial loan application.

“In line with Mah Sing’s tagline ‘Reinvent Spaces. Enhance Life’, we have analysed and extended our role to understanding people’s sentiment and their livelihood,” says Lew.

More than just a house

As chief design officer, Lew says his vision is to infuse design thinking as a top-line business strategy for innovation and sustainability within Mah Sing, with design thinking as a mindset and process for creative problem-solving through the understanding of its customers’ journey and expectations.

“In the 20th century, we make people want things. Now, in the 21st century, we make things people want. The previous generation was a consumer of goods, while the new generation is the consumer of experience,” he says.

The paradigm shift, he says, is that homes are no



“It is about the making of a home rather than the building of a house. It has become more personal, confined and versatile.”

— Lew

Artist’s impression of jogging and cycling tracks at Southville City



Cerrado Residence at Southville City (above) and artist’s impression of its drop-off area (below)



longer just about four walls and a roof over it. “We are creating a new experience where it tells the fruit of the owner’s journey in pursuing a dream home.”

As part of Mah Sing’s roadmap this year, the developer has established initiatives to understand the customers’ behaviours, expectations and concerns in its design thinking; to enforce quality workmanship for the customers’ peace of mind; and to future-proof business sustainability by driving digitalisation. “It is time for us to go beyond just recovery. It should be about resurrection, resilience and relevance,” he says.

According to Lew, work from home (WFH) is another buzzword that has emerged over the last two years. “It is something we cannot ignore but have to address in all our current and new developments.”

He notes that Mah Sing has been rapidly expanding the telecommunication infrastructure to ramp up online connectivity throughout its developments to cater for the huge demand of high-speed internet usage during this period of WFH.

Urban living at Southville City

An example Lew gives is Mah Sing’s Southville City @ KL South development in Bangi, Selangor. The 428-acre freehold master-planned township offers urban living surrounded by parks.

“The lush parks surrounding the township are designed for learning and appreciation of nature as well as to enable recreation and enhance mental, social and physical health. These lifestyle parks are conveniently accessible within the development to allow the community to move freely and safely on a 7.1km bicycle track and jogging path that loops around the development. With everything well connected, every lifestyle pursuit is easily accessible from each resident’s doorstep,” says Lew.

In terms of layout preferences, Lew observes demand for unit types with 2+1 or 3+1 rooms, where the additional room can be converted into a home office, an online classroom or a studio. “Other layout types include dual-key units where the single room can be transformed into a full-fledged office or even a quarantine room,” he says, adding that

balconies have also become a popular feature as part of the living room extension to serve as a play area for children or pets, a workout space or even an indoor garden.

Interior design-wise, Lew says there is a tendency to lean towards more flexible and versatile space planning for the multiple uses of a home, which can also be an office space or a play and workout area. “There are also preferences for natural colours and a seamless connection between the interior space and the external outdoor, creating a healthy and tranquil balance within the home.”

According to Lew, Southville City @ KL South also incorporates an automated waste collection system (AWCS) as part of its innovative wellness amenity. “The AWCS centralises clean waste collection in high-rise projects without using manual labour to manage the collection of waste.”

Also, as online orders and deliveries have become the norm for many people, Lew says Mah Sing has designated locations for PopBox automated parcel lockers to facilitate deliveries and for hygiene purposes. “We are procuring the essential elements for contactless systems such as automatic door sensors, touchless lift call buttons and RFID recognition.”

To further minimise physical contact, customers are encouraged to use Mah Sing’s apps on their smartphones.

In terms of construction, Lew notes that Mah Sing has explored the industrialised building system (IBS) to minimise manual labour and improve productivity and workmanship on-site. He adds that the company’s procurement strategy is to source from local suppliers for easily available materials and reduce dependency on overseas sourcing, which comes with high charges and delays, especially during lockdowns.

For Southville City @ KL South’s landscape design, Lew says, besides the common sizeable green area that was once a popular showpiece, there is now a need for separate green pockets and a sky garden. “This is to encourage small groups to carry out healthful activities while managing social distancing,” he says.

I B I L I K

New demand shifts and values in the rental market

Amid the bewildering pandemic, job losses and a lower affordability level, the local rental demand has also shifted and witnessed a rising trend.

GFG Group and iBilik CEO Ken Lee says in an email: "The demand for rooms [versus whole units] has increased in the market. The requirement for the locations has changed; [we have clients who prefer] to get away from the crowd, and be closer to work, amenities and transport.

"We are seeing the rental in central KL area dropping significantly. For example, you can rent a studio unit (300 sq ft) in KL city for as low as RM1,000 per month," he continues.

"For the key suburban areas, the highest demand is for rental rates of RM350 to RM600 per month. Many more are looking for lower [rent] and with zero deposits. For key education hub areas like Sunway, monthly rent for the whole 3-bedroom (1,100 sq ft) unit has gone from RM3,250 to as low as RM1,600."

For a bit of background, iBilik is recognised as a one-stop rental property management services platform that includes property management, affordable zero deposit insurance, renovation and fit-out services, and the generation of rental income. iBilik forms part of the property investment and management company of GFG Group.

To date, GFG Group is managing over 6,500 rooms with an occupancy rate of around 85%. "Our average tenancy is 12 months. So on an annual basis, we would have easily matched over 5,000 rooms with tenants. iBilik has a database of over 100,000 owners. A majority of them have five units and below," says Lee.

He addresses the affordability issue as a key consideration: "Affordability has also played a big part in the selection of location. More people are trying to stay further away from prime areas to get a cheaper rental rate. But they require places that are closer to public transport so that they can leverage that.

"Home has become more than just a roof over your head. The demand [for] and utilisation of space have changed significantly; they need to be configured differently."

According to Lee, proper ventilation and lighting have been factored into the new demands. "Due to tenants looking to use the space for various functions including work, there is a need to look at providing a better balance in the furnishing aspects. Workspace and wellness spaces such as home office, indoor gym, and yoga and dance studios have become an important part of a property.

"Despite our abundance of space compared with major cities like Japan, in some ways, we need to learn from them in making space more compact. This helps in managing the customers' cost expectations and, at the same time, allows better physical segregation (social distancing)."

Unlocking values

Meanwhile, there are several challenges that have emerged in the rental market. "The biggest issue we are seeing is the property owners' inability to pivot and turn their property around quickly to sustain their return on investments (ROI). This, in turn, leads to hasty sell-off or trying to rent out the whole unit. However, this is not what the market wants. This is where the mismatch happens, resulting in properties going vacant," says Lee.

Nonetheless, he notes that property buyers are still in the market. "They just need a better ROI plan for them to commit, given the economic situation and dipping bank loan approval rates.

"We have seen hotels closing, with 120 hotels (over 108,000 rooms) having closed temporarily or permanently in Malaysia in the past 12 to 24 months. Property developers have over RM18 billion worth of overhang properties. In the commercial



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sector, there are over 50 million sq ft of vacant office space," he observes.

"We have created various plans and strategies to help all the stakeholders to ensure their supplies can be turned into income-generating assets, and to meet the rising demand for affordable rooms. This is where our end-to-end service can cater for the needs of the renters and owners in these post-pandemic times.

"For property owners, converting their properties to room-by-room rental versus the whole unit will help to improve the overall rental and be able to meet the demand for affordable rental," says Lee.

"For developers, instead of focusing on selling their properties, they should provide investors with an end-to-end solution to help generate a stream of income for them. This, in turn, will also help

their property to have better appreciation. With the help of property managers, they can repack-age their products to make them more attractive."

As for hotel owners, with almost zero tourists now, he suggests that "they should convert their spaces to mid- to long-term co-living or co-working offerings. Their existing assets are readily capable of providing for these. It's a matter of changing their target customers and business model."

Meanwhile, for commercial office spaces, Lee says "they should convert [them] to smaller dedicated offices versus hot desks or large open spaces. The way the co-working space has been designed in the past to capitalise on community engagement is no longer working out due to the new norms."

A fresh approach

As a platform, Lee highlights that iBilik has altered its approach to suit the current demands. "For those [properties that] we manage on behalf of the owners, we are changing the way we operate and interact with our tenants to provide the same level of services yet ensuring the health and safety of our team as well as the tenants."

The group, he says, intends to educate the market on ways to manage the tenants' expectations due to the changing norms. "We need to balance between affordability and safety, especially in a co-living or co-working environment."

Meanwhile, in terms of the Centralised Labour Quarters (CLQs), the group is working with partners to ensure they are meeting the new amendments to Act 446: Employees' Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations and Amenities Act 1990.

CLQ is initiated by the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) Malaysia. The board has worked closely with the Ministry of Human Resources to enhance safety and health for workers, which has resulted in amendments to Act 446 that was passed in parliament in July 2019.

The amended Act 446 makes it compulsory for employers in all industrial sectors, including construction, to provide accommodation for workers that meets minimum standards as outlined in the Act. Some of the common facilities include gated-and-guarded accommodation along with features such as kitchen, medical and recreational spaces.

Moving forward, Lee highlights the rise of property technology or proptech. "We are investing heavily in proptech. It will enable and cater for a lot of the requirements and demands. iBilik is investing in integrating it into our ecosystem and will continue to accelerate [its] adoption across the market."



There is a need to look at providing a better balance in the furnishing aspects



Converting properties to room-by-room rental versus the whole unit will help to improve the overall rental

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