



Visionary vanguard

Considered to be one of Malaysia's most famous architects, Frank Ling is surprisingly modest about his accomplishments. Instead, he prefers to talk about architecture and the misconceptions people have about the field. In this interview, **Anandhi Gopinath** gives us an insight into the man, his roots and his vision.

Neither Frank Ling's house nor his office next door have numbers on their doors, so instead of entering his office I accidentally walk into his house. I interrupt a gleefully innocent father-son moment — Ling, one of the country's most famous architects, is playing with his son and cajoling him in Spanish. I retreat hastily, but he waves away my embarrassment; apparently this is a mistake many people make.

Ling's living and working quarters are tucked away in a quiet area of Bukit Tunku, a very old set of walk-up apartments that don't quite seem to fit the persona of someone in his line of work. However, what it lacks on the outside is made up for with a blaze of colour and light inside, as the warm sunshine covers the living space that is decorated with beautiful art pieces and a collection of unique furniture.

"This is only half the stuff," he says as *The Edge* photographer Lee Lay Kin points out a Philippe Starck chair for him to sit on. "The other half is in Spain."

Ling's wife and business partner, Pilar Gonzalez-Herraiz, is Spanish. The duo run their firm, Architron Design Consultants Sdn Bhd, in Kuala Lumpur and Madrid. Herraiz spends most of her time in Madrid with their 10-year-old son Bosco, while Ling spends an



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equal amount of time in both places.

Ling's niceness — his is the kind that almost emanates from his pores — is a defining trait. Soft-spoken, with kind eyes and a warm, genuine smile, Ling is likable on sight and draws you in with his storytelling abilities. And it's not just the verbal kind either — his stories are told with his buildings.

Ling's architectural qualifications are nothing if not intimidating. He is a graduate of the Architectural Association School in London and a registered British Chartered Architect. He also holds a master's degree in architecture from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

As an architect, Ling is most concerned about establishing a sense of belonging. The value of anything he designs is not how beautiful it is externally, but how well it suits its purpose. There's a deep respect for the land and its surroundings, something that has shaped Ling's visionary and all-encompassing approach to his work.

Some of Ling's more notable projects are the newly landscaped annexe of the Bursa Malaysia building along Jalan Raja Chulan and several private residences in KL.

Ling was recently involved in a unique collaboration with Martell. Called the Martell XO Architect Edition, it required him to create a special box for the brand's signature arc-shaped bottle. The design he came up with

is striking and unique. It looks like a lantern, which can be slid down over the bottle to sheath it or raised up to reveal the cognac in its amber-coloured glory. His design strategy alludes to the kind of architect that he is and the surprisingly simple, yet practical, approach he takes as well.

"Since the theme was sustainability, we wanted to create more than just a box that holds a bottle," he begins. "It needed to do more than just be a box." Silk fabric and bamboo was the ideal choice; the silk was especially chosen for its softness and opacity. Ling says silk also has an additional meaning — in the same way silk is produced as a result of the metamorphosis of a silkworm into a cocoon, cognac takes years of maturation to become the ambrosia that it is.

"The bottle itself is so sculptural that there was no need for anything else; a solid box to cover it would be too much. The silk covers it without blocking the entire view, so it's more sensual. We wanted some functionality as well, which is important. So for it to be able to sit elegantly on a shelf, we installed an LED light on the top, one that is powered by a manually wound spring," he adds. A lantern by definition is mobile, so handles on the top serve to transport this piece of art as well as to use as a lever to lower or raise the silk screen.

The square shape of the lantern cleverly highlights its role, casting a soft orange glow on the cognac bottle within it. Yet, its size is just neat enough to ensure the

attention remains on the bottle. It's a wonderful play on colour, texture and space, and its practical use only adds to its appeal.

Ling's approach to space and design comes from a childhood spent far away from the trappings of city life and tall buildings — a small village outside Sibul, Sarawak.

"It's a very interesting community. The entire community there came from one village in China, and their neighbours in China lived in Sarawak as well. They lived across the river in China, so in Sarawak they lived across the Sungai Rejang," he smiles. "They understood nature very well, and they were very good at forecasting the weather and all that. I grew up very aware of the moon and the tides and nature in general," he says.

Ling's village was also home to a huge colony of fireflies and other seasonal birds and insects, which was wiped out when the well-meaning officers with the World Health Organisation came with their DDT sprays. "At the time we didn't know what happened to the fireflies; we didn't know then what we know now about DDT," he says.

A travelling circus act that went bankrupt contributed to the unique mix of fauna in his village too, as it left its entire menagerie in Sibul. City Hall contacted Ling's relatives, who agreed to care for the animals. So Ling grew up surrounded by elephants, zebras and other unusual wild animals, which became a pull factor for many other people. Farmers would also bring wild animals they had caught that needed a home to this de facto zoo, which included rare creatures that Ling has never seen since.

His little village soon became industrialised and its inhabitants moved to bigger cities to study and find work. Ling himself was shipped off to a boarding school in England, where he did his A-levels and eventually his architectural qualifications.

Architecture wasn't an ambition of Ling's, but he does recall having a penchant for building things, art and a love of colour.

"As children, we learnt how to build boats from the Melanau and the Malays. It was great fun, and we would beat corrugated sheets and propel them in the water with rubber bands," he reminisces with a laugh.

London was a tough adjustment to make for Ling, especially since there was limited exposure to the British colonial system where he grew up. "In every movie I'd seen, all the Englishmen lived in Belgravia, and then upon going there all those myths dissipated — I realised that everything was so different. But my biggest effort in school was really to adopt these things, but not lose yourself."

Yet, in one way, lose himself he did — Ling originally intended to study engineering, and was lured into architecture purely by accident. Literally. He was in a laboratory as part of an engineering introductory course and some machinery exploded, drenching him and some other students in hydraulic fluid. "Engineering was definitely out after that," he laughs again.

Also, his artistic side was calling out to him, and much louder than it ever had; he knew he had to give in to that. His equal love for both the outdoors, nature and art, and the more structured form of mathematics sent him on a year-long tailspin — during which he kept on studying — before finally settling on architecture.

"The architecture movement at that time was very strong, which you could see from the urban structure of a university town," Ling says. "I had a great education by physical experience. Then I met some people, architects, who said 'well, have you thought about architecture?' So that's how it happened."

He joined London's illustrious Architectural Association School of Architecture, the teaching format of which had been changed to establish a much more conducive environment to engender more creativity among its students. Rather than becoming a "glorified technician", as Ling puts it, architects were born from a better place and background.

This is also where he met Herraiz. "She was my college sweetheart," Ling smiles. "My class was so international — we had Lebanese, Americans, English, of course, Dutch. They were all so different, and it taught me to cherish diversity and being different."

With his base in the UK, Ling had spent a lot of time travelling across Europe and had already fallen in love

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The lantern-inspired creation for the Martell XO Architect Edition

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with Spain. In meeting Herraiz, Ling saw Spain in a new light and fell in love all over again. "To this day she thinks I married her because I love Spain," he jokes.

He smiles accommodatingly when I ply him with more questions. "The class was 80% girls, and we were all good friends, travelling together and all that. Pilar and I wanted to be together, but her parents were very traditional and if she didn't go back to Spain, the alternative was to be married. I was always against the idea of marriage, and it was so uncool to be married at the time too," he laughs again. Yet, they did in fact get married, and spent several blissful years working in the UK and Europe.

Ling and Herraiz moved to KL in 1993, despite getting good jobs in the midst of slumping economies in the UK and Europe. It was Herraiz who had suggested moving to KL, where Ling got a job with a famous local architect — Hijjas Kasturi. His first project was the Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM — now UiTM), close to home in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak.

"That was really a test for myself," he admits. "We were working with a Canadian landscape architect who was very much into conservation. So together, we scrapped the entire master plan and came up with a new one of our own — much to the annoyance of the ITM officials who were sent to Sarawak.

"When you work in England, the thing you learn about authority is that you engage with them, not be afraid of them. I rang up the head of ITM in Shah Alam to talk to him and he agreed to see me. When I walked in he said, 'Frank, look out the window, there is all this forest and this is very important.' And I said, 'Well that's precisely what I'm here to talk about!' And so that's how I got to work on the ITM project," he laughs.

The landscape Ling was dealing with was a secondary forest that ranged from hilly areas to peat swamps. Cutting the hills and levelling the ground was in the original plan, but Ling explained how it would work so badly, especially in the way it would offer no protection from the heat or flooding because of the rain. The new master plan adopted a more environmentally friendly approach, and the buildings were designed to use as little electricity as possible with ventilation a key element.

This was in the 1990s, which means Ling was being green long before the term became trendy. "The green way of living has always been there," Ling says. "It just depends on how you look at things. If a lot of these things are taken as backward and we don't take the real essence of things, it will all be lost. In the end, we have to import certain green theories that actually came from us. ITM had 4m roof cantilevers and cross ventilation everywhere and we enhanced the social structure of the place. It could have been built better, but it's a building I am extremely proud of."

Moving to KL, Ling had to again adjust to living and working in a new country and with Herraiz, began to discover new ways of working that were very different from how things are done in the UK. The arrival of Bosco forced them to establish a firm base, and they chose their current home and office space in Bukit Tunku so they could work and raise their son. A huge chunk of their time is spent travelling for their academic projects, and they had to re-adjust their workflow substantially. They decided to educate Bosco in Spain, which made it possible for Herraiz to open the Madrid branch of the company they had founded.



Ling's unique take on architecture could perhaps be a result of his exposure overseas, or perhaps it comes from something innate. We'll never know either way, as Ling is not the kind to talk about his own work or what he and Herraiz have achieved with the company. Instead, he prefers to talk about the field of architecture itself and the misconceptions that are often attached to it.

For example, architecture is not a style, Ling says. "Does your solution or concept suit the brief? Have you reinterpreted the brief? Or are you just drawing a pretty building? Anyone can come up with an idea of a pretty building, even an engineer. Architecture is more than that. We had to study history, engineering and all that to go beyond style to see why these things are there. Every part of a building, from the front to the interior to the nuts and bolts, they have to have some kind of relationship, and they all have some kind of story to tell."

So what's his design process then? I'm eager to see how he puts his principles to work.

"No disrespect to lifestyle magazines, but we tend to tell our clients 'look, be very careful with lifestyle

magazines because they are showing a whole array of what is possible. But don't take it wholesale; it's not you," he laughs. "That is usually the most time-consuming part for us, but it's worth it. If you go through that process, there will be very few changes later because you begin to engage with the client. Even they will realise what they need — 'we don't need a glittering dining room, we need a nice dining table in the balcony in the terrace'. This is on our website, and is something we always say: style is not our concern. If there is a style, it's a disposition that emerges as a consequence of the design process."

That client-architect relationship is something Ling really enjoys. "It's amazing how couples themselves discover certain likes and dislikes while doing this. Couples have had huge rows in our design sessions because they realised they had differences that never came out," he says.

"This is why architecture is a social art. It has all the sciences in it as well. There is so much humanity in it. People keep thinking it's a style, and that's dangerous. It's a way of life, and it shouldn't be just about style, that will eventually come," he adds.

In Malaysia, Ling feels that architecture as a social art is still in its infancy. Architectural development right now is segregated — you have official architecture like the type in Putrajaya, then you have more commercial work. There is no collective movement as yet, which is good for a young country like ours because a collective, especially when it is official, can be stifling.

What Ling hopes more people will understand is the relationship between architecture and social planning. A building needs to correctly operate in the community it's in, and can't just be a pretty building. "A good environment for living is not a collection of beautiful buildings," he points out. "It's really the streets, the pavements, the facilities and the way you transport yourself from A to B so you don't need a car. George Town in Penang was built like that, and Melaka was built like that. And now Singapore has managed to do it."

Ling's complaint is that most developers only look at the piece of land that is theirs and how to make the most of it, how to build it, and how they can get people to and from the piece of land. It's not done deliberately, which is why there is hope, that we can change the way we look at social planning.

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Ling uses a clever analogy to describe his point. "In Asia we use a lot of Ajinomoto in our cooking, and similarly we use a lot of Ajinomoto in architecture too. Basically the food is mediocre and the produce is not great. So to cover it up we throw in as much Ajinomoto as possible, and after a while it all tastes the same! If you don't add the Ajinomoto the clients ask for it, because we've been brought up with it. If you have always had it, you cannot develop a desire for refined taste."

A township Ling thinks is getting it right is Taman Rimba, but it's not the most appropriate example because it's not a township, and a gated community of houses is very different from a working village or town.

Ling finds Japan a good example of well-planned villages and towns, and China as setting a new standard for town planning. A project Ling and Herraiz are currently working on is a dream come true for them, as they are designing a new city in southern China, details of which they are unable to reveal just yet. Ling has one thing to say about the people he is working with in China, however. "They understand that we cannot destroy the natural surroundings in the name of development anymore."

He doesn't ask the obvious question — when will we come to that conclusion here in Malaysia?

Until we do, Ling is content to do his work the way he does it and lay the groundwork for a future that is more concerned about creating conducive living spaces for communities to live in, and not just pretty buildings that meet purely an aesthetic need. It's both a visionary and necessary approach we need to take as we develop our nation. How comforting it is to know that there is already someone two steps ahead with a torchlight to lead the way. ■