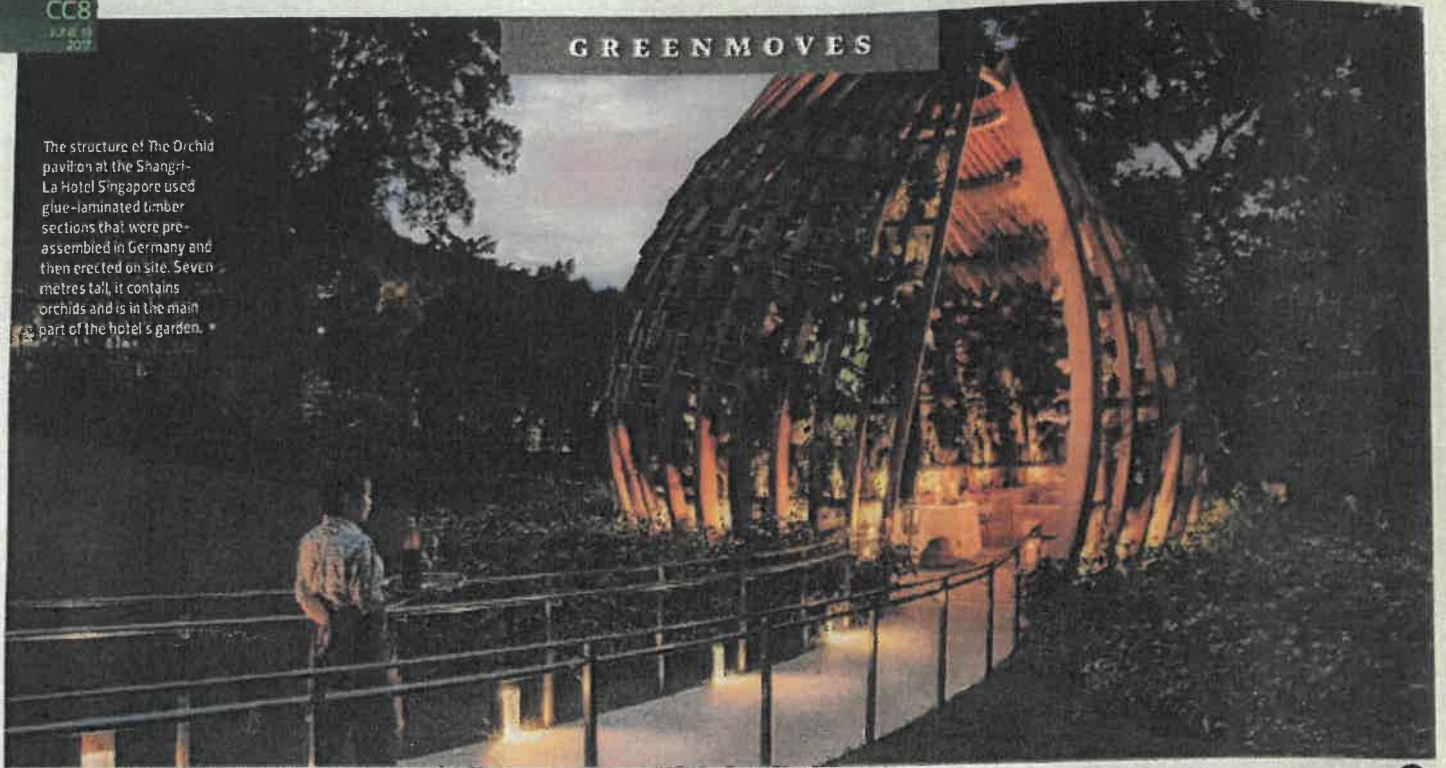


GREENMOVES

The structure of The Orchid pavilion at the Shangri-La Hotel Singapore used glue-laminated timber sections that were pre-assembled in Germany and then erected on site. Seven metres tall, it contains orchids and is in the main part of the hotel's garden.



Integrated architecture

BY WONG KING WAI
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The first career path of Franklin Po, founding principal and creative director of Tierra Design Pte Ltd in Singapore was not architecture. He was meant to be a doctor. "My first degree was pre-med. I was brought up when you didn't have much choice — doctor, lawyer or engineer were the preferred career options. You have to remember, I'm a pretty old guy," Po chuckles.

He completed a bachelor's degree in biology in the US, but he didn't get the grades to move on to medical school. So, he decided to take up architecture.

"Along the way I learnt about systems — biological systems, botany, genetics, chemistry — and it was good for me as I became very analytical in my thinking process. And I think that kind of paved the way when I started looking for a career. I was very interested in taking pictures, so I thought I would go into photography. But then my practical side and Asian background told me I needed to find something to fall back on. I said, as an architect I can always take photographs, or paint or draw.... so I went into architecture."

In 1973, Po completed his Master in Architecture at the University of California in Los Angeles. After 20 years in the City of Angels, in 1993, he returned to Singapore and for 24 years worked at RSP Architects.

He was later asked by a friend to join him in building up his fledgling practice as a landscape architect. So he joined Tierra Design as a partner and soon found himself running the show when his partner emigrated. His hard work saw him honoured with Singapore's President's Design Award Designer of the Year in 2015.

Po says his first love is still architecture but his ability to do landscape architecture and interior design has given him an integrated outlook on design.

"This is why I call it integrated design because it is about putting all these things and disciplines together and coming up with an environment inside and outside the building. It is about spatial qualities, and I look at all the materials as an architect, an interior designer and landscaper," he says.

"Good design transcends all these disciplines. You can't look at an external design without looking at what the architecture is doing, what the interiors are doing. You have to understand the synergy between



FRANKLIN PO/TIERRA DESIGN

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PICTURES BY TIERRA DESIGN

The Park Royal on Pickering hotel used 52 species of flora on different levels and was completed in 2014

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"And when you study some of the historical personalities like Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Aldo Rossi, you begin to understand they were not just about the building, but also the internal spaces that became more than just rooms. They started opening them up and rooms borrowed from other rooms, so your small apartment looks much bigger because you have laid it out well.

"I extend that to the external environment. You borrow from those spaces and bring them into your room and all of a sudden this room is no longer four walls. It's that wall out there, with the trees. It is the extension of space."

This insight has been used in one of his latest projects, Aira Residence, by Selangor Properties Bhd. Po was tasked with the landscape portion and found that the other designers were kindred spirits who understood the need for the outside to blend with the interiors and the external aesthetic.

"When we looked at the plan, it was very complicated. I couldn't go from one garden to another because there was no linkage. If you have noticed, in the best buildings you have a front door. You know where the entrance is. It is very visible and understandable. There must be clarity in the planning process. When that is missing, if you don't know where the front door is, guests don't know where to go. So that was the first thing we looked at.

"When we looked at the plans for Aira, we needed to find the proper front door for that sense of entry. From there we needed to find the way to all the other places in the development, and along the way we developed places that create excitement, tranquillity and serenity through sounds, light and movement of air, and that begins to orchestrate the sensibility of how people are going to be using these spaces and how they relate to them."

This project is not Po's first in Malaysia. In 1998, he took on Hampshire Park in Kuala Lumpur. "That was very well received. It was 1998, during the Asian financial crisis. The developer thought they wouldn't sell but they sold well," he says.

Other projects that have the Po touch include The Orchid at Shangri-La Hotel Singapore, Park Royal on Pickering and the Vertical Garden at the Ocean Financial Centre, all in Singapore. Po, who describes his design philosophy as "constantly evolving", believes it is important to "get under the skin of my clients" to do the work given to him. But, he says, sometimes the clients do not know what they want and so he has to play the part of a psychologist.

"I have to guide them through. I have to cajole, persuade and not antagonise. I have to make sure that at the end of the day, they see something good and they feel happy with it. That they feel satisfied with their environment and home," he says.