



# A fine balance

Meet Studio Bikin, the young architectural practice fast making a name for itself as an exceptional designer in the testosterone-driven world of architecture

**I**N THE notoriously male-dominated world of architecture, the prevalence of the double-X chromosome is shockingly lacking. In fact, the American National Architectural Accrediting Board found that while the number of female architecture students averages 40% for B.Arch. and M.Arch. programmes, only a small number of them enter the profession. This is all the more apparent in the lack of female "star architects" as Ann Forsyth put forward in her article entitled *In Praise of Zaha*. Miss Forsyth analysed the number of female recipients of prestigious awards like the Pritzker prize, AIA and RIBA Gold medallists and found that the female winners were mostly in practice with their husbands or partners, generally in a firm bearing both their names. The exception of course being the singular Zaha Hadid who made history as the first recipient of the Pritzker in 2004 – and the Stirling Prize in 2010 and 2011. Closer to home, the disparity in numbers is just as evident and while there is a ways to go before the divide is narrowed, it's heartening to find accomplished and thoughtful work by young architectural studio, Studio Bikin – comprising of two cool and spectacularly talented female architects, Farah Azizan and Adela Askandar. While the endearingly named Studio Bikin was officially established only in 2011, Farah and Adela have been behind the effortlessly stylish destination restaurant and bar, Hit&Mrs; Ipoh's smartest eatery, Plan B at Kong Heng; and a handful of residential projects possessing a refreshing point of view.

In person, the women are a study in contrasts – Farah comes across as the bold, spirited one, a tropical flower dressed in long, flowing robes while Adela is calm and collected, the epitome of Scandinavian chic in her



by Jennifer Choo

polka-dot headscarf and minimalist tunic – yet their easy rapport is unmistakable. "We met ages ago at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) where I was studying and Adela, who was in Unit One (Malaysia) at the time, came over to London. We bumped into each other in a bar because she was in town to present work at a talk organised by the AA. So you could say, I picked her up from a bar," laughs Farah. Since they both had common friends, they were always in each other's social orbit and had the chance to collaborate on private jobs on the side even while Farah returned to Malaysia and began work at Seksan Design.

Indeed, after a couple of projects, Farah and Adela realised they had a good working relationship as they drew on each other's strengths and gelled precisely because they were so very different. "Adela, being a mum of two little girls, is the organised one which is good because projects need structure and timeline. Delivering a good project takes more than just creativity, it requires discipline and Adela brings me back to earth and her meticulousness gives order to this practice," explains Farah.

However, more than just having compatible working styles, Adela is quick to point out that the fact that she and Farah shared similar thoughts on architecture was what forms the foundation of their practice: "As we worked together, we found that we also shared similar opinions on architecture, and this basis and principles gave us a firm platform to embark from."

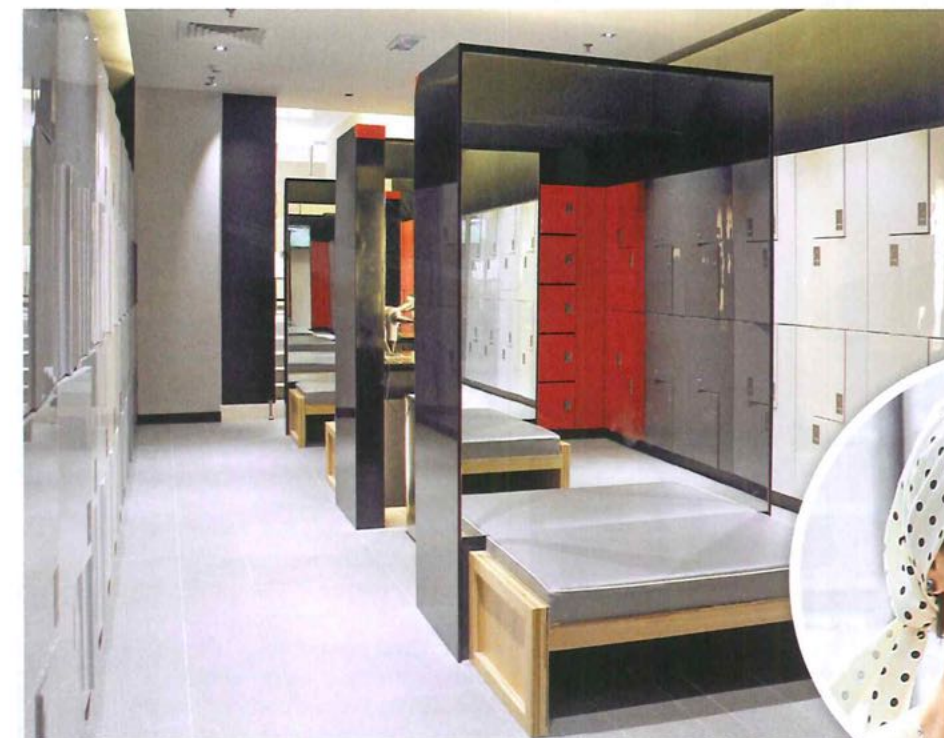
The Studio Bikin architectural ethos is founded on the belief that architecture fundamentally needs to be functional. "We believe that architecture is not about style and at the end of the day what governs architecture, especially in the tropics, is having a deep understanding about the context, typography and climate. It's very practical stuff," opines Farah.

Adela chimes in: "It goes back to our basic need for shelter, you could say an almost utilitarian approach. I guess it's because of our collective experiences, Farah coming from Seksan's landscape architecture practice where projects were approached from the outside in. For myself, coming from a more traditional architectural practice which took a more inside view and I always felt that wasn't satisfactory enough and projects were not done in the holistic matter."

Following from this, Farah adds: "While working in Seksan, every time a project was handed to us, we had to fill in the gaps where the architect didn't have time to, which I didn't feel was right. As specialists in the built environment, we shouldn't delineate the spaces around it. I think that the architect as the creator of this space in the larger sense, should be conceptualising everything and approach the space as a whole." Although Farah admits she can see how demarcating duties is done successfully in big commercial projects, she feels that because of Studio Bikin's size and their collective experience, it's possible to conceptualise everything and make sure all the parts fit like a jigsaw puzzle. By virtue of being a small practice, Studio Bikin is also uniquely positioned to do small projects where they can design the way they like to. "It's sort of an obsessive thing for us, like when you



A residential design



Jatomi Fitness



The Long Retreat



Kurau House

do a project in school where you do everything – from the branding to the concept to the finishing touches. And we think it's important to think at a holistic level on all the projects we do, so that everything reads and transits seamlessly," Farah concludes emphatically.

While Farah and Adela are intensely committed to their architectural projects, they are equally passionate about having fun with their work and one way of expressing this is through Kedai Bikin, their own line of Malaysian-crafted furniture ranging from loose furniture to light fittings. "We were doing furniture for our projects because there was always something bespoke we had to design," explains Adela. "Furthermore, we view our contractors as craftsmen, the artisans who take our ideas and make them into something tangible. So when the people from Publika approached us to take up a pop-up space for furniture, it sped up the thinking process and gave us a deadline to work towards,

but the designs were always in our heads," muses Farah. The experience was a steep learning curve for the duo and they learned that the retail industry was rather different from consultancy work. Despite this, they found Kedai Bikin an enriching experience especially since they also featured carefully curated pieces from other local designers. "We want to encourage people to buy local and provide a platform for young designers. And all in all, we managed to create a successful one with Kedai Bikin," states Farah.

Indeed one of the fruitful collaborations which has come out of this exercise is an ongoing collaboration with Lisette

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– Farah

Scheers, who heads one of KL's most exceptionally creative agencies, L-Inc, and founder of her own range of beautifully designed stationary and accessories range, Nala. Studio Bikin recently moved into the ground floor of the Jalan Kemuja shophouse where L-Inc occupies the first floor while the storefront is taken up by Kedai Bikin and Nala. The serene space had been renovated by Studio Bikin and bears all the hallmarks of its approach – lovingly detailed concrete, flowing spaces and judiciously deployed landscaping, even indoors. "We believe that our pieces complement Nala and vice versa, the Nala products add a softness to our furniture while our designs give Nala an edge," says Farah.

What's next for Studio Bikin? Quite a fair bit if the list of projects it has on its plate now is anything to go by. "We're in the middle of doing a shophouse conversion in KL and the redevelopment of a row of shophouses in town. On top of that a few house renovations, new builds, restoration and adaptive reuse and the rejuvenation of stately houses. Oh yes, not to mention a showroom interior, a restaurant and a spiritual retreat," smiles Farah. "We are happy to work on varied projects and whatever comes our way that is interesting but the client needs to share a similar point of view. The chemistry between us and the client is important which could explain the broad range of projects because the connection can intersect on different tangents, be it financial, design, etc. And it's all about balancing those elements so that we are able to sustain our practice, be proud of what we do and allows us to grow organically as designers." Indeed, it sounds like Studio Bikin has managed to strike just the right balance as a practice with its clients and as co-designers working with each other.

## Spatial delivery

Where do Farah and Adela feel most inspired and whose work makes their imagination take flight? The architects share their thoughts.

### Farah

**MY** favourite architects are Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Lina Bo Bardi. Both Brazilians and in essence, modernists. Both designed monumental buildings that were brutal, sweeping and abstract; they were so raw, unadulterated and brutish yet sexy in a big way. I find their work to be totally sensitive, grounded and earthy while still being kinda old school – no fancy, dandy, decorative shit.

As for my favourite spaces, that would be under the duvet covers in my bed; or walking the old Jewish quarters in Istanbul.

### Adela

**CURRENTLY** my favourite architects are Studio Mumbai. I love the way they are pushing the boundaries of construction with their close collaborations with local craftsmen; yet achieve a light, contemporary touch that's very much in tune with the tropical climate they're designing for. Beautiful work, plus we share similar sources of inspiration, including an architect I've admired since my university days, Laurie Baker!

To be inspired – anywhere by a vast, vast beach or exploring the streets within a Kasbah.

