



Zaini Zainul

Perhaps it's something you are born with. That flair for design, that exquisite taste for the finest of lines, the impeccable eye for details and choice of colours, and finally, to artfully blend them all together. Zaini Zainul is a master of such talents.

The architect's abode in the heart of Kuala Lumpur is truly immaculate. One would even dare say it looks a tad unreal. As if by some magic, Zaini seems to have created a home so perfect, it looks like a page out of a magazine. The only difference is this space is for real and was borne out of the imaginative faculties of a creator who seems to transform everything he touches into works of art.

His artistic talent surpasses that of the obvious architect. Not only does Zaini design offices, homes, and the furniture that goes with them, he paints and sculpts too. A natural diversion, but why this foray, I ask Zaini. "It began as a hobby, but more and more of my customers wanted to buy my pieces, so now they can get the whole package," he quips quite nonchalantly of his much sought after talents.

In the city, the oval club, Zouk, is a building beyond our wildest imaginations that has set the benchmark on how a happening club should be designed. Designed by Zaini, it's the place for the terminally hip; be it local party-goers, the expatriate community or visiting tourists. The unusual building begs for a second take with its bulbous, marshmallow-like exterior. The lines are fluid and reminiscent of something out of a science fiction movie, which has infused Mediterranean and Spanish architectural elements quite effortlessly.

Zaini is also the brain behind the design of Kuala Lumpur's Frangipani Restaurant, known for its dining area around a pool of water. Described as 'sexy chic', the restaurant has been featured for both its food and elegant design in various international magazines.

On a more serious note, Zaini's architectural hand in the development of Putrajaya will remain his prized contribution to the nation. Using a combination of tropical hues and other natural elements, Zaini designed the Putrajaya Shangri-La

boutique hotel. His other pet project was the Putrajaya City Hall, the design of which was based on a turned out mango.

After almost 20 years of a successful career-building sojourn in the USA and France, this University of Columbia graduate is now home to grace the local scene with his artistic expressions. Zaini was based in Paris for many years and his achievements have brought him recognition the world over as one of the finest architects of our time. But now, like the prodigal son, he returns and one wonders why, considering his remarkable success overseas. "It is time for me to return home and, I need to be near my family," he says of his retired marine officer father, homemaker mother and sister who live in Langkawi. "Well, perhaps I miss the food as well, like *nasi lemak* and *roti canai*," he says of his favourite breakfast dishes.

In reality, Zaini is poised to make his mark in the Malaysian design scene that he has been dabbling in a lot of late. "It is so exciting here as there is so much potential. Our rich cultural heritage should be reflected in our buildings and structures. As we advance towards modernity at such a fast pace, we can't afford to let our past slide by. It's just too challenging to miss, it's great!"

Enthusiasm aside, he admits that it would take him some time to adjust to the Malaysian surroundings. "But that's how it is. It is part of my job too to adapt to the changing trends and times," says Zaini, who speaks French fluently.

Zaini deals with life with a sense of humour and it's evident that this trait probably contributed towards many of his achievements. He is easygoing, without any pretentiousness and seems almost uneasy with the accolades. Perhaps the biggest surprise for him with all the recognition is that he is merely expressing himself as an artist. "I see every project as a piece of art, not mere structures. Architecture too is an expression of art and being able to design or create something out of nothing is certainly a great way to experience the wonders of the world we live in." 📍