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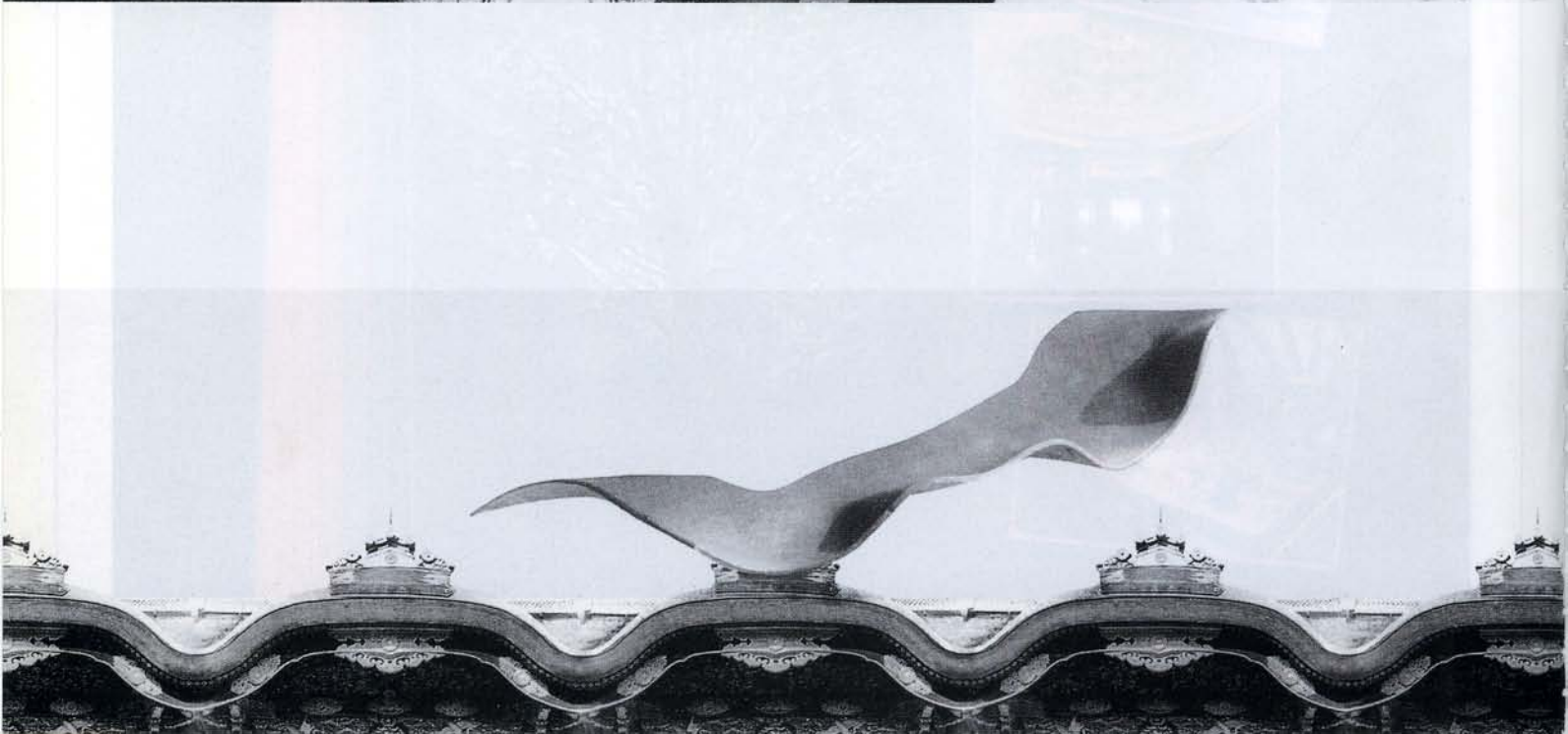
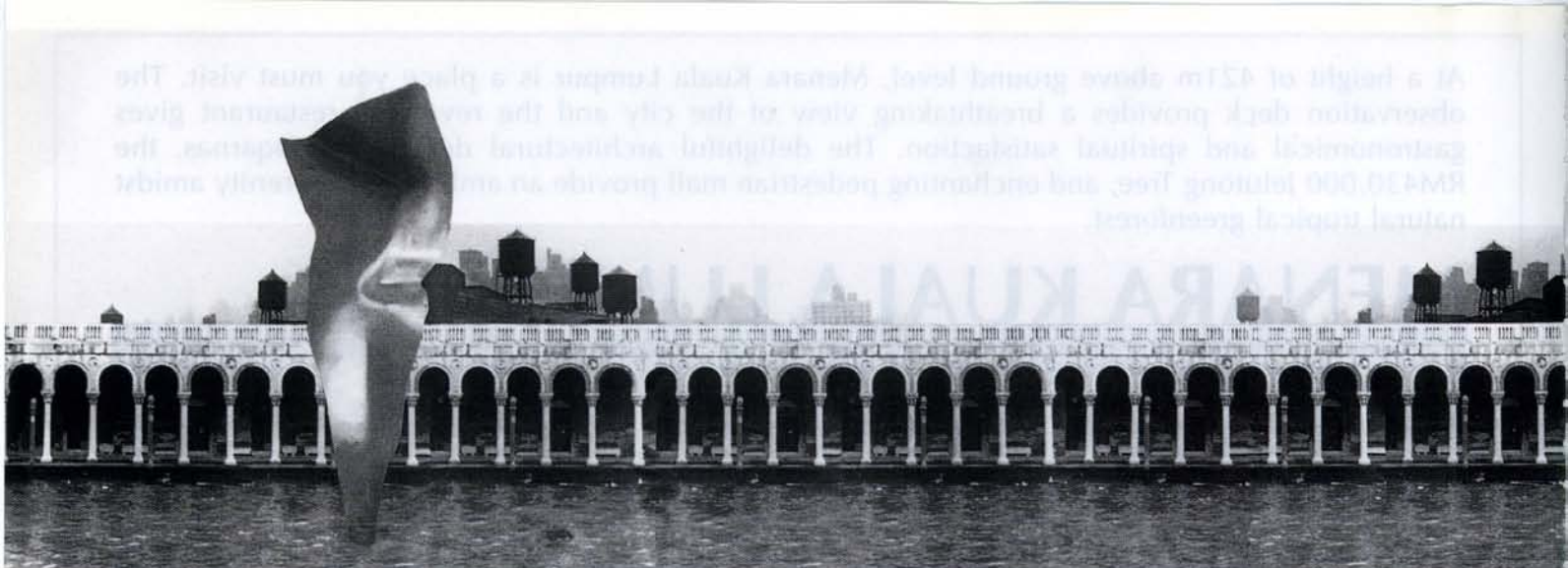


Photo collages
from Zaini's "False
Impressions" series.
From top: *The
Constraint of Arcadia,
The Reflection of
Difference, The Flight
of the Calligraph.*



Zaini with a proposed tower (above) and his powerful sculpture *In the Shadow of Ledoux* made of 162 rings of plywood.

Powered by a passion for art, Malaysian architect, Zaini Zainul, is making waves in the international arena with his visionary habitats and surreal sculpture and photography

ZZTops

text Viji Krishnamoorthy



Strictly

From top left: Zaini's innovative designs include a proposed 80-storey tower for a Kuala Lumpur client, the award-winning French Embassy in Singapore and the futuristic proposed "Six Towers Project" for Kuala Lumpur. Below: Photo collage *The Pressure of Belief*.



speaking, architecture was not his first love. Like an arranged marriage, he took the "plunge" not knowing what to expect. Over their three year "courtship," he would discover a side of her that would pique his interest and she would unveil aspects that he would never have hoped to discover. At 17 it was hard to feel passionate about a subject that was alien. Now, art, he knew well. As a young boy, Zaini found much beauty in textiles and in the visual arts. Becoming an artist complete with canvas, easel, tubes of paints caked with previous reminders and a host of paint brushes was how he envisioned his life to be, certainly not sitting at a massive drawing table with rulers of all shapes and sizes and technical drawing pens. Yet, when he won a scholarship to the U.S.A. for his tertiary education, he couldn't imagine telling his father (a marine officer) he wanted to pursue a degree in Fine Arts. Instead, he found himself agreeing to a bachelor's degree in Architecture.

With bags packed and new horizons beckoning, Zaini set off for Washington University in St. Louis. Fortunately for him, the university didn't separate fine arts from architecture and to his delight, he found himself painting, dancing, singing and sculpting. Three years later, with a BA in Architecture tucked securely under his arm, Zaini returned to a Malaysia that was swallowed in a recession. When Ivy League Columbia University offered him a place on their masters programme, little did Zaini realize that his life would change forever. It would be at Columbia University that Zaini

would experience several firsts.

Where St. Louis is the heart of America, New York is the pulse and nerve centre. "New York City is a city to be alive in, and for young budding architects, it is incomparable in terms of exposure," says Zaini. It was here that he joined forces with a group of friends and dreamed up art installations for specific sites. Calling themselves a(d + V)u2 z, this delightful cocktail smacked of young blood on the brink of stardom. Gracing the covers of architectural magazines and winning an award at The Young Architects Forum, they knew their formula worked when the celebrated dancer Gus Solomon approached them to design the set for his dance piece entitled *Siteline*. "That was an incredible honour for us as it is quite unusual for a dancer to approach architects to design his set. It was a challenge for us as we had to pay particular attention to lighting and the dancers' movements in relation to the stage installation," reminisces Zaini.

In the same year, hungry for challenge, Zaini entered a competition organized by the National Institute of Architectural Education of the United States. It was a competition open to graduate students and Zaini walked away with the first prize — a travelling fellowship called the Paris Prize. "I decided to travel, experience and study the different architectures of the world." For six months, Zaini travelled through 16 different countries — Japan, Southeast Asia, Egypt and Europe and put together a collage of his travel photographs. These surreal yet effective photo collages entitled "False Impressions," break



Ether/1, a sculpture for the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations (above), and photo collages from the “False Impressions” series (clockwise from top right): *The Pharmakon: Intra Muros/Extra Muros, Empire of Signs, The Edge of Cartography, The Burial of Rosetta.*

the traditional boundaries, marrying Belgian landscape and Parisian skies, or fusing a Japanese temple with a house in Penang, Malaysia. In this collection of 24 limited-edition postcards, Zaini challenges the usual boundaries and rules, and instead, offers a peek into a world that is unaware and unblemished by demarcation lines.

Had a soothsayer predicted that he would live and work in Paris (his final stop), Zaini probably would have scoffed. But when he was offered a job with Architecture Studio in Paris, he decided to take it. “At the time, under Mitterand’s government, there were a number of new buildings burgeoning in and around Paris. I was fortunate to be there as we were working on the European Parliament building in Strasbourg. Under such exciting and stressful circumstances, I picked up French,” he says.

It was Zaini’s participation in the highly publicized theoretical design competition — Another Glass House — that thrust him into the limelight. “The brief asked us to design a futuristic glass house that evolved around a glass house built by Philip Johnson.” Zaini’s creation, *Glass Vessel*, won the first prize, beating 673 entries worldwide. Philip Johnson, a renowned architect from the U.S.A. was eloquent in describing Zaini’s entry: “To live in that crystal cave, to move through those strange spaces, to experience such an environment is a delicious thought.”

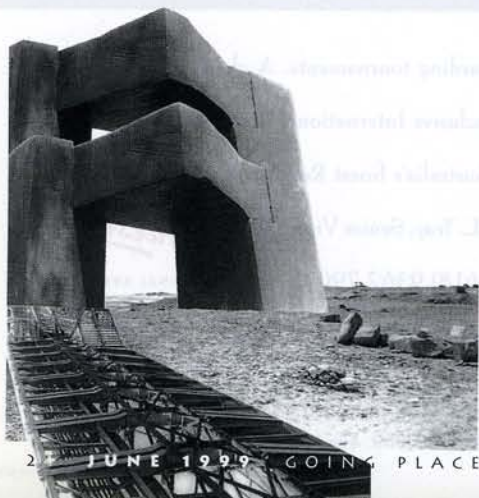
Within a year of his French experience, Penang-born Zaini, together with Englishman Mark Goulthorpe and a fellow Malaysian, Tan Yee Pin, formed a triumvirate

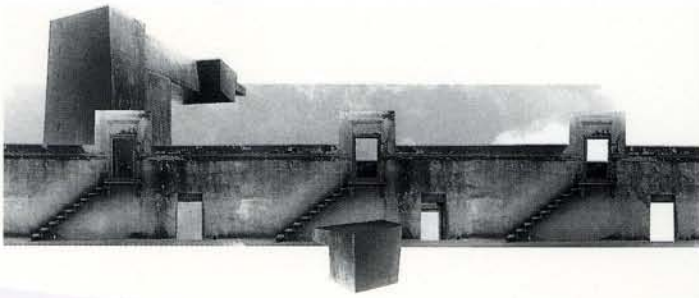
called Decoi. The next five years proved to be highly interesting and rewarding, as the trio won several international architectural awards, including the prestigious French “Albums de la jeune architecture.” However, the proverbial feather was securely fastened in their cap in 1995 when they were the only architects to be invited to participate in an art exhibition entitled “Dialogues of Peace” in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations at the Palace of the United Nations in Geneva.

“My greatest moment must be when we (Decoi) were among eight architects selected by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs to represent France at the Sixth World Architecture Exhibition in Venice, three years ago. Being appreciated by a country other than your own is a great honour,” recalls Zaini.

While he had a keen interest in photography and sculpture in their independent forms, it wasn’t until his alliance with Thomas Richez and Bertrand Dubus to form Zaini, Dubus, Richez (ZDR) in 1996 that Zaini started to blend architecture, sculpture and photography.

Zaini is currently on home ground, spearheading ZDR Malaysia into new territories. When Technology Resources Industries Bhd approached him to build and improve their building that is destined to become Technology Resources World Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Zaini proposed two additional towers to envelop the group as a whole and yet to reflect their independent nature. Since the core nature of their business is telecommunication, the design includes a visually interactive facade with graphic advertising and news bands snaking their way around

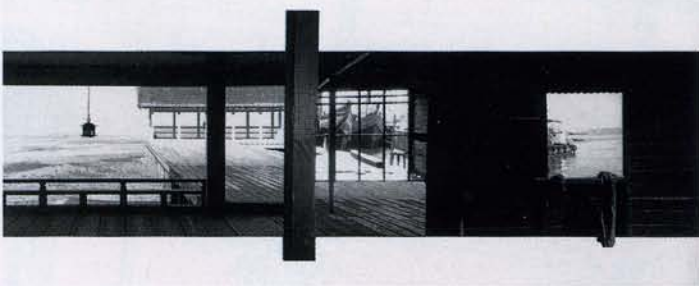




the three towers. The ground floor of the old and new wings will resemble the stilts on traditional kampong houses.

"A large development project like this is challenging because it comes with a very strict budget. The challenge lies in being able to design an innovative and functional building without compromising on environment and keeping within the budget," says Zaini.

It is the Urban Design Project of Putrajaya (Malaysia's new planned capital) that is currently keeping Zaini awake at nights. Working alongside Arkitek Urbanisma Sdn Bhd, they are creating a people-friendly city on an island in a man-made lake. "This is where most of the commercial activity will take place. We are trying to develop a good blend of commercial and residential development on the island by paying much attention to its public



spaces like courtyards, parks and the pedestrian walkways. What we are aiming to build in Putrajaya is an intelligent garden city," explains Zaini.

"Architecture is continuously evolving and needs to understand the environmental, technical and social issues of its time. It is challenging for me to build buildings that are sensitive to all these issues. These are exciting times for an architect in today's Malaysia. I feel the country is ready to receive innovative designs. With the Petronas Twin Towers and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), Malaysians are standing on the brink of a renaissance in architectural design. I also believe that the time has come for Malaysian architects to be given greater opportunities in handling 'grand projects.' Everyone has to start somewhere and I feel Malaysian architects are ready to rise to the challenge."

"No doubt, my travels have inspired me and where the architecture of the past varies from one culture to the next, in today's global world, the challenge is to create a global identity in the buildings that I design. Our traditional heritage is a legacy and is a source of inspiration and sometimes a starting point in creating innovative designs. For me, personally, in today's ever changing world, I would like to build a building that will survive the ravages of time, to be constant and ageless," says Zaini. *



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