

# MASTER OF THE MICROCLIMATE

**Pok Kobkongsanti, design director of TROP Studio, which has been appointed the landscape architect for the landmark 8 Conlay development by KSK Land, does not believe in adhering to templates but, rather, letting the topography and climate dictate his expression of landscape architecture.**



Joanne Kua, KSK Group CEO and KSK Land managing director and Pok Kobkongsanti, design director of TROP Studio

In a world that has long been in thrall to the dazzle of big-name architects, it seems time at last that the landscape architect is now slowly but surely stepping forward to claim his place in the sun. After all, what is the cold hard steel of a blockbuster structure without the organic elements with which it may express itself? For a profession that has long been misunderstood or simply under the design radar, landscape architecture is not mere gardening. It is, in fact, the qualified study and practice of the creation of both indoor and outdoor environments to assist and enable life to flow and flourish between buildings. Landscape architecture brings physical architecture to life, creating a viable space to live, work and play. For what is the purpose of a building if not to provide shelter or serve as a safe and inspiring haven?

TROP Studio design director Pok Kobkongsanti's philosophy is simple: "We just want to create unique designs for each single project we work on. Actually, I always say at TROP, we have no style at all ... rather, we pay attention to the site and let it determine what landscape design is needed without forgetting to focus on the design process, which is as important as the design itself." The 12-year-old Bangkok-based landscape architectural design studio's name is, most fittingly, an abbreviation of the words "terrains" and "open spaces" and its staff are fondly referred to as Tropsters.

Having been commissioned by property developer KSK Land for its maiden 8 Conlay development in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, Khun Pok muses: "Great dwellings are about memories, for making memories in. In order for guests to remember their stay forever, the experience has to be perfectly seamless, right from the second of their arrival. Our role as landscape architects is to help create a better journey for, and throughout, the stay. [And for residents], we compose the outdoor spaces that make for a better living experience and environment."

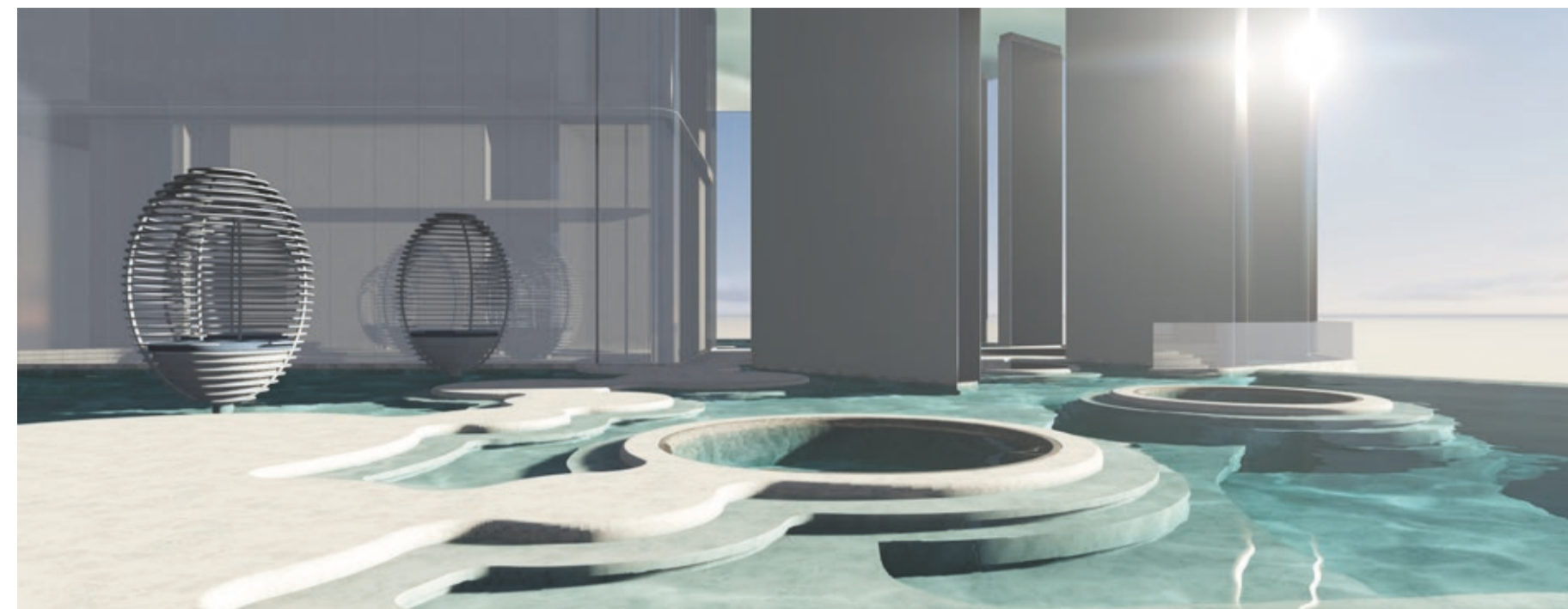
8 Conlay will include two towers of branded residences called YOO8 — designed by Hong Kong-based Steve Leung and British celebrity designer Kelly Hoppen — and a third that has been designated for the first Kempinski hotel in Malaysia. The towers will be ready by 2021.

Citing a childhood that was very nature-immersed, with garden play being a key part of his growing-up years, Khun Pok says: "Nature is in my blood. My parents loved gardens and that's pretty much where we spent most of our time growing up." Falling into his profession "by accident" — the happy result of having scored the last seat in the landscape architecture department at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Architecture — Khun Pok went on to further his studies at Harvard University while chalking up work experience with Bill Bensley, at a time when the latter's firm was expanding in a big way in China and India.

However, TROP's portfolio showcases a less whimsical style than the American design icon. "We believe good landscape design doesn't need to scream 'look at me' all the time," Khun Pok smiles. "It must belong to the context, to the topography of the site and to the culture of the local people."

A case in point is his work for the Ad Lib Hotel, tucked away in a cul-de-sac off congested Sukhumvit Soi in Bangkok. A bijoux property of only 40 rooms, the hotel was designed to target long-staying guests who need to be close to the famous Bumrungrad Hospital. "The hotel offers little to no views, being almost back to back with the hospital's walls," he shares. "To make it more inviting, I wanted to create the atmosphere of a house and different microclimates using plants and greenery."

Visitors to the Ad Lib are greeted by a majestic ficus that the Tropsters fought hard to save. "Ficus trees were used in bygone days to mark different parcels of land and I think it makes for a beautiful approach to the hotel, with its swinging roots and shadows," says Khun Pok.



8 Conlay's three swimming pools will each be distinctive and special



TROP Studio is famed for its organic, terrain-conscious approach towards landscape architecture

Today, the Ad Lib's main guest demographic stems not from its proximity to the hospital but rather the design-conscious set. "So, I think we succeeded," he smiles.

Citing agricultural landscapes as his main inspiration, Khun Pok agrees that they must, nonetheless, be functional and complementary to its natural context: "It shouldn't be pretentious but extremely beautiful."

On his involvement in the creation of 8 Conlay, one of the most talked-about developments in Kuala Lumpur, Khun Pok says it all happened over a meeting with Hud Bakar of RSP Architects Kuala Lumpur, which is responsible for the architectural concept and masterplan. When asked about his brief, Khun Pok says matter-of-factly, "I didn't have one. I was just asked to suggest what I thought worked best for the site, with the only requirement being that the landscape design tells the same story as the architectural narrative."

Never having visited KL before, Khun Pok says his first impression of the Malaysian capital was "impressive". "The city turned out to be more verdant than I had thought and I was also impressed by the urban planning. After seeing how green the city was, I thought why not have a rainforest in a building?"

With Kuala Lumpur being home to 7.7 million people and over five million registered vehicles, it is smaller than Bangkok by comparison but it is undeniable that Khun Pok's experience with metropolitan designs would not go amiss. After all, one of the most important plus points when it comes to considering a place to stay in any city, be it for the long or short term, are convenience and accessibility, coupled with restfulness.

"I visited KL after someone had recommended my studio to Joanne [Kua, KSK Group CEO and KSK Land managing director] and Hud. It is very different from Bangkok, which is generally flat without much trees or greenery. KL possesses an undulating terrain, with lots of mature trees. But my philosophy is not to merely mimic or copy nature outright and put it within a building. So, for 8 Conlay, I wanted an abundance of local plants and also to showcase the magnificent ancient rain tree that was already on the site. When you think of the rainforest, the first thought would be of the big, towering trees. But for 8 Conlay, what I want to put forward are the smaller



trees, the varieties that aren't privy to so much sunlight and have to fight to survive. These are the ones I want to apply to the terrain as they will be in the shadow of the towers."

On paper, the major landscaping work will start from the ninth level where there will be a waterfall dividing the residential and hotel towers. "I wanted the sound of the water which, in turn, will work to cool the environment. The waterfall won't be seen as a mere divider per se but rather a different experience of nature on both sides," explains Khun Pok.

8 Conlay also offers the luxury of three distinctive swimming pools. "The residential pool will be particularly fun," he adds. "I call it the 'blue room' as all you will see is water with the overarching theme inspired by a single water droplet."

"My thought process is always customised. I look at things as a whole. Yes, there needs to be a single design language for coherency but there must still be distinc-



An artist's impression of 8 Conlay, which will stand proudly in the heart of KL

tion. I like to think of 8 Conlay as one family but with many members. I don't subscribe to the idea of a design template for there is never one basic recipe. Tropsters use instinct, guts and whatever catches their interest at the time ... but we also like to work layer by layer, adding details. Slowly but surely, you will see a design landscape beginning to form."

Listening to him express his thought process, it becomes evident how Khun Pok became the first Southeast Asian to win the prestigious American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) Award. "That's why I don't believe in templates. If you follow the proverbial rulebook strictly all the time, it's not going to be nice ... or fun."

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