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And his secret love

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Speaks up!

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NATION BUILDER

LAI VOON HON

on the landscape of the future



The Futurist

Fast-forward thinker and design delinquent Lai Voon Hon challenges conventionalism with his avant-garde hotel and luxury property designs.

Ezilea Omar talks to an architect extraordinaire

IF YOU'VE EVER been to the Westin Kuala Lumpur, you will know which way the wind blows for Lai Voon Hon, President/CEO of Ireka Hotels Sdn Bhd and IREKA Land Sdn Bhd. He is the man responsible for spearheading the hotel's contemporary design, which is testament of his concepts. At the i-Zen showroom, one of Lai's up-market property development projects at Mont Kiara, he shares his passion for creating amazing hotels and luxury residential apartments with *Le Prestige*.

Lai graduated from one of Britain's top architecture school – The Bartlett School of Architecture at University College in London. "I've always loved art and drawing ever since I was a boy, but for most, the Science Stream was the way to go." His father was a contractor and Lai was exposed to the building industry early on. "Buildings interest me, and initially I wanted to be an engineer, but my father was the one who encouraged me to become an architect because when you

"THE PRODUCT THAT IS CREATED SHOULD OUTLIVE THE COMPANY THAT CREATED IT"



Photography by Shahrul Azhar



build a building, the engineer rarely gets the credit" Lai jokes. "I owe it to my parents for giving me the freedom to be creative."

Upon graduation, Lai joined Michael Squire Associates, designing high-end residential apartments in London. He later moved to S'International at their Hong Kong office, where he was involved in designing luxury hotels in London and Hong Kong, namely the Regent Hotel in London and Ramada in Hong Kong. At 23, Lai absorbed everything at super speed, having to work with consultants more than half his age. He sharpened his skills not only in designing, but also in human management.

In 1990, Lai joined Pertubuhan Arkitek, a reputable local architecture firm, where he further developed his skills in designing and managing projects, which included a high-end condominium, a five-star hotel and commercial offices. "When we did the design for Radisson, which is now Grand Maya, the design concept was slightly

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ahead of its time," says Lai. He took a year off in 1992 to pursue his MBA at the prestigious Ashridge Management College in the UK. There, he did his parents proud by sailing through his studies, graduating with a distinction, and winning the best student award. "Business is very much like architecture," says Lai. "It is the need to convey ideas, create visions and set trends." Armed with business acumen, he joined Ireka Corporation Berhad as their General Manager in 1994 and moved on to become the Group's Executive Director in 1999.

In the property front, Lai developed the i-Zen brand, a luxury apartment living concept in Mont Kiara. The project has taken off successfully with two i-Zen projects, i-Zen@Kiara II and i-Zen@Villa Aseana, all taken up. The third project, i-Zen@Kiara I, is under construction, and the latest addition to the i-Zen brand, Tiffani by i-Zen, was launched recently.

Tiffani by i-Zen is Lai's latest project, where celebrities like the famed Jimmy

Choo have snagged two units, and Bernard Chandran and Fann Wong have both bought a unit each. "It is sometimes essential to know who your neighbours are, and a home must be designed to suit your lifestyle," he smiles. "To buy a house, you must be passionate enough. With i-Zen, I wanted to bring emotional attachment to the property." Ireka's business has also expanded to Sabah, where the company developed the first gated landed property called Luyang Perdana.

Ireka's flagship hotel, The Westin Kuala Lumpur, has won many accolades and awards, the latest being the Prix d'Excellence Award 2006 by the influential International Federation of Real Estate (FIABCI). With success after success under his belt, Lai lives with the philosophy that

"the product that is created should outlive the company that created it." He believes that a property should appreciate in value over time. "The property business has greatly changed the past 10 to 15 years with customers becoming more aware of trends, as well as more people being able to afford luxury homes."

Some people are born under a lucky star; Lai could very well be one such person. "I'm very fortunate that I took the right path and followed my dreams," he says. "I just couldn't ask for more in life, and I appreciate every little thing that comes my way." When he's not at work, Lai is off jet-setting to a travel destination or spending time with his two young children and wife. "Sometimes circumstances give you the opportunity to learn," says Lai. "I am very fortunate indeed." ●

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As a first-year architectural student in London



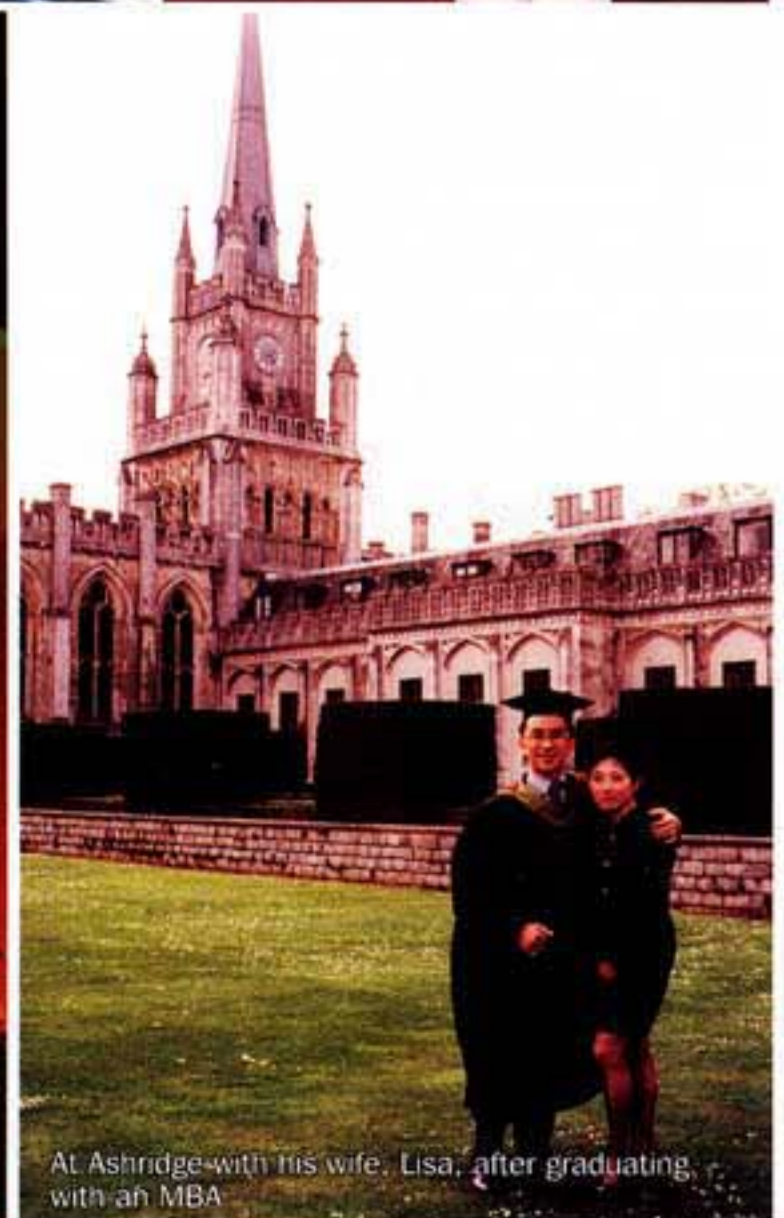
A practising architect in Hong Kong, 1989



Delivering a welcome speech as President of the Malaysian Association, University College, London



Accepting the Prix d'Excellence Award 2006 by FIABCI for The Westin, Kuala Lumpur



Al Ashridge with his wife, Lisa, after graduating with an MBA