

Lai Voon Hon, CEO of Ireka Development Management, the property arm of Ireka Corporation

HAUTE LIVING

Armed with vision and a pioneering spirit, **Lai Voon Hon**, CEO of Ireka Development Management, reshapes the Malaysian landscape into all-encompassing luxury realties. *Words KC Yap*

Just over 20 years ago, when suburban Mont' Kiara was still dense with rubber estates, a few developers saw great real-estate potential in the agricultural territory. As a result of this foresight, the area has since become a prime neighbourhood, teeming with luxury lifestyle staples and uber poshness.

Amongst the key players who are outlining the Mont' Kiara skyline today is leading property developer, Ireka Development Management. The real estate arm of the Ireka Corporation Bhd (founded since the late 60s by Lai Siew Wah), whose other core businesses include construction, hospitality and IT networking solutions, Ireka Development Management is currently spearheaded by the Group's second generation descendant, Lai Voon Hon. Today, Ireka is the exclusive Development Manager for Aseana Properties Limited, the property development machine that paves the way for Ireka to undertake development activities in Malaysia and beyond.

It was through Lai's vision that Ireka's high-end developments were brought to life. But the CEO, who's also a registered professional

architect, remains appreciative to his business opponent. "The credit goes to Dato' Alan Tong (former steward of Sunrise Sdn Bhd and current group chairman of Bukit Kiara Properties) who was amongst the first few to see the potential in Mont' Kiara. I shared the same vision and saw that it could be a haven for trendy urbanites as well as an international mix of tenants," says Lai.

Lai's international exposure has brought us fine living that hip and luxury connoisseurs of Malaysia are accustomed to today. "Before, I always thought that something was missing in the property industry. Developers used to just provide a 'shell'. But in the 90s, I saw a rising emergence of ID magazines in Malaysia, which showed that people here were becoming more discerning. That gave me the conviction to raise the bar. So we started putting in the wardrobe, the furniture, etc. to create fully furnished, design-oriented homes, and we're glad that our competitors are following this trend. It drives us to be better and inspires new innovations," Lai explains. Today, the Group's coveted luxury developments include i-Zen @ Kiara I and II, i-Zen @ Villa Aseana, Kiaraville, Tiffani by i-Zen, as well as the upcoming Seni Mont' Kiara, altogether boasting a portfolio of over 2,000 units of modern, service-oriented abodes.

Even though Lai was born into the family that founded the business, his focus was not always

fixed on joining the Group. His was a tale of an independent spirit seeking knowledge and a place in the outside world, only to return with a tested skill set to join his family in helming the empire. "I wanted to do something bigger out there on my own. After my studies, I worked in London and Hong Kong," reveals Lai. "Somehow, opportunity led me back to my family. I realised that instead of championing for someone else, why not for myself and my family. My father gave me a lot of freedom to express my mind. With that, I got to chart my own course and bring the business to the next level."

Since then, Lai has gone on to revolutionise the real estate landscape and change the way we live. From his thoughts came the i-Zen concept, a brand defined by the basic principles of luxury and fine living. However, he expresses that fine living does not equal to the overdramatic decors that have traditionally defined 'luxury'. "I like to provide homes, not showrooms, where people find something special that makes them stay, like unique features, designs and services. These are what constitute luxury... things that make people feel that their lives are enhanced." He adds, "With i-Zen, we hope to style lives, hence our tagline 'Life styled by i-Zen'."

i-Zen is in the heart of every Ireka property, which encompasses the five 'S'—Style, Service, Security, Sophistication and Soul. "By Style, we



George Smith.
FOUNDER

mean every i-Zen property should be styled. The layout should correspond to the lifestyle of the people," Lai elaborates. And given that security is the prime concern nowadays, i-Zen's Security measures ensure that all systems and procedures are routinely upgraded, checked and rehearsed.

When it comes to Sophistication, the Group constantly incorporates cutting-edge innovations to bring convenience and effortlessness to every aspect of the i-Zen lifestyle. "We don't want to just provide a shell. Back then, when we found out that the Internet was becoming a huge part of people's lives, we provided Internet plug points in every room."

As the Group used to own and manage The Westin Kuala Lumpur, Service has naturally become an intrinsic part of the i-Zen luxury. "In the hotel line, service is what determines the rating. Likewise, a condo shouldn't be without any human touch," says Lai. As a result, Lai has introduced the concierge service, including laundry and part-time cleaning services.

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The luxuriously furnished living room of the new Seni Mont' Kiara; (Below) An artist's impression of the recreation deck

The final 'S' is Soul. The concept is founded to ensure every development instills a sense of belonging, identity and pride. "We want to suggest that when you come home, you're not just coming home to a shell. There's something special that makes you feel welcome. For example; in Kiara II, residents feel so warm because the concierge staff are always so helpful and friendly. Then there's Villa Aseana, whose greenery is ever so soothing and refreshing."

With the world growing more concerned about the environment, Lai reveals that the company will soon be introducing a sixth 'S'—Sustainability. He elaborates that the green effort will be expressed through both design and material. For example, "the main window or living hall won't be entirely facing east or west to avoid full exposure to the sun and the use of extra tinting or heat-proof glass panels." Lai admits that property development is not exactly the greenest industry considering the wastage and high consumption of natural resources, but he explains that these problems can be minimised through the use of prefabrication products, a futurist architectural concept which allows components to be assembled offsite and then transported to the construction site afterwards.

A creative mind needs to be constantly fuelled with inspiration. Lai gets his ideas from all his travels. "I love observing different cultures, lifestyles, architectures, etc." says Lai. The two destinations that never cease to rejuvenate his creative wits are London and Tokyo. "London is overflowing with creativity. Every corner you turn to, you'll be able to find something unique. It has become such an international place where



the mainstream and the fringe co-exist. I enjoy Tokyo for its extremity. It has an energy that makes you feel younger. The people are just full of life, and the city is constantly ablaze with lights, colours and psychedelic designs. You see the most extreme of traditions and innovations living side by side," describes Lai.

Lai also emphasises that throughout all his travels, he never parts from his American Express Platinum charge card, a travel companion that he recommends to all businessmen. "It's part of my lifestyle, I've been carrying it since I was 19," says the astute entrepreneur. "When I was in Europe, when all my other cards didn't work, my Amex card did. And when my friend lost his wallet during his trip, Amex helped him fly back. It's this kind of comfort and reliability that makes Amex a trusted friend." In a way, this has also inspired Lai to create the high level of comfort, trust and friendship that Ireka's inhabitants have come to enjoy. ■

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