

The image shows the interior of a traditional wooden house. The walls and ceiling are made of dark wood. There are large windows with wooden frames and shutters. A large wooden door is open, leading to an outdoor area with a stone wall and a wheelbarrow. Two wooden chairs with red patterned cushions are visible. A colorful lantern hangs from the ceiling.

**“WOOD MAKES US  
FEEL GOOD,”**

**Almaz Salma shares the  
design inspiration behind  
Kuang Retreat House,  
winner of the 2017  
Malaysian Wood Awards.**

The Kuang Retreat is put together using traditional construction techniques. Simple and practical, it honours the environment by using reclaimed tropical species such as chengal, balau, kempas and merbau for the entire house. These details can be seen in the beams, floorboards, louvres and weatherboards.





**PFA: Can you briefly share how you became an architect?**

**AS :** My parents introduced me to architecture when they discovered my strengths in art and science. I did Double Math & Physics for my GCE A-levels and during that time, my tutor arranged for special art classes with a teacher who had a very strong interest in architecture. With that arrangement, I began immersing myself in the study even before going to university. I have

been working as an architect for 34 years, 24 of which is in my own company.

**PFA: Where does your passion for wood come from?**

**AS :** My father, a civil engineer, was posted to Kota Kinabalu in 1969. We lived in a beautiful government timber house in Tanjung Aru on a large unfenced compound. All the government quarters were made of timber. During the school holidays, he would take our family to

visit the smaller towns and plantations. These houses were also made of timber.

The experience living in a well-designed timber house at the age of 11 had a life-long impact and encouraged me to continue exploring methods of design and detailing. I love everything made from wood, not just buildings: boxes, containers, plates, souvenirs... I am immediately drawn to them!

After I got married, my husband and I often visited his traditional family house in Kampung Pasir Panjang Laut in Perak. I have adopted several details of this timber house into the design for Kuang Retreat House.

**PFA: How would you describe your design style?**

**AS :** I believe in designing in context. As most of my work is in Malaysia, a tropical country, this 'tropical style' is the most pronounced. The design principle is manifests itself as natural and organic. We acknowledge the sun, rain, wind, humidity and thunderstorms in the design so that we can celebrate the co-existence between man, nature and the built environment.



**PFA: Can you discuss what makes wood such a good material to work with?**

Wood in interior spaces gives its occupants a warm grounded feeling. It gives us a sense of belonging, links to history and nature... Almost like a déjà vu of the great forests which are not in our lives currently. Generally, wood makes us feel good.

Wood can also be purchased in many forms: solid, laminate, veneer and plywood... It can be carved, laser-cut, glue-laminated... It can be used as structures, furniture, finishing, decoration, ornaments and light fittings. It is so flexible. You just need imagination.

**PFA: What have you learnt in your career so far?**

**AS :** There are always challenges when working with timber. Timber is the oldest building material. I have seen structures in Sweden and Japan which are a few hundred years old that were built using the same principles and logic. The challenge is to encourage people to enjoy its beauty and warmth whilst accepting the maintenance that comes with it.

There are people who discourage the use of timber but as architects we have to empower ourselves with knowledge on how to treat and detail timber.

**PFA: How do you think the wood design scene in Asia is doing right now?**

**AS :** Asia must move with the times and not remain in time warps to remain current and appealing. Architects, interior designers and product designers must think out of the box and yet preserve workable practices. As a whole, I think we should open up to new coatings and treatments that can enhance the longevity of timber.

**PFA: What is hindering the use of wood in construction in Malaysia today?**

**AS :** The two main obstacles today are: procuring well-aged and dried wood at a reasonable price; and the dearth of good wood craftsmen using the tanggam method. ☺

