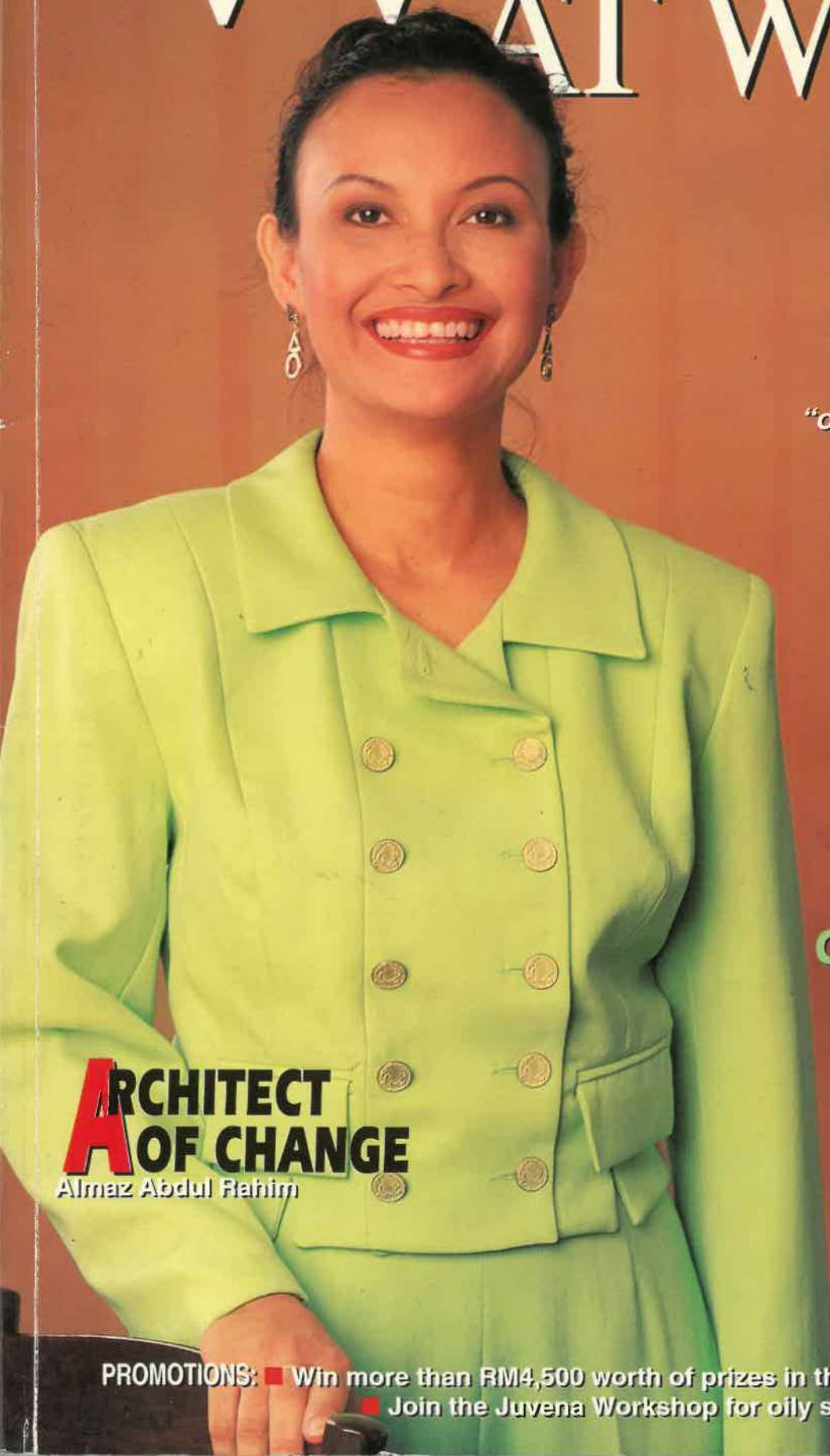


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**ARCHITECT
OF CHANGE**
Almaz Abdul Rahim

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Architect of change

“Whatever the boys can do, you can do better,” Almaz Rahim’s mother told her daughter as she was growing up. Almaz Salma Abdul Rahim is certainly out to prove that. Being one of the very few women architects in the country who run their own firms, she is determined to make life easier for the women and children who will live in and utilise the buildings she designs. “I’m always telling my staff, ‘Public toilets should have one sink lower for the kids, one urinal lower for the kid,’” Almaz says. “These are the things that I hope will make it easier, not just for the child, but for the mother as well.”

By Winnie Lim

Alma Rahim, 37, has been in the architecture and design business for the past 11 years. Trained at the Bartlett School of Architecture and Planning, at University College London, she went to work for BEP Akitek Sdn Bhd after she graduated in 1984.

At BEP, Almaz was able to explore the different areas of building and design.

“I decided I wanted to do everything,” she said. “That’s why, in the ten years before I came out on my own, I had done design, dealt with authorities and clients, as well as my consultants. When the project went on-site I became the project architect, and I looked after the entire project. And then when we had to do interior design, I did that as well. That really fine-tuned my architectural sense, because we actually went into really fine detail. Also when you come back and do architecture again after doing a stint in interior design, you really know how to finish your building properly.”

The wide range of experience Almaz gained in her ten years with BEP has been a definite advantage for this petite powerhouse, now that she runs her own architectural firm, Almaz Architect.

Located in Plaza Damansara in Damansara Heights, the offices of Almaz Architect occupy the second and third floors of the office lot. Almaz’s

office and reception area share the second floor with Werk-Haus, a graphic design business owned and operated by Almaz’s younger sister, Ezraah Fatimah. The third floor is the architects’ department, fully appointed with the tools of the trade. The offices, which Almaz designed herself, are decorated and furnished in a mixture of classic and modern influences; wood and mirrors accent brick and stone to convey an elegant yet homely ambience.

“I spend so much time here, it might as well look like home!” Almaz commented.

She employs a small staff of 7 people at present. As principal architect, Almaz is determined to be involved in every step of designing the buildings her firm is commissioned for. This is why she plans to keep her business small. “Many people want to deal with the principal herself because they get personal attention; you can make decisions so much faster ... if I’m going to maintain that kind of service, then I have to stay quite small.”

Thus, Almaz takes a real hands-on approach to her projects; she likes to be in on them from beginning to end. “I don’t like not to know what is going on,” she said. “I make it a point, if I don’t know something, to do it (myself). In the end it gets easier ... The knowledge just opens up everything. It’s very challenging.”

Not to mention the fact that she just plainly loves architecture. "It's my first love after my family," she says. "My husband said a few years back, 'You're not working, it's your hobby!' It's very much a part of me."

How did Almaz get interested in architecture?

"I enjoy creating things," she says. "I love art. But I was in Pure Science (in school). Architecture's a profession where you can actually mix the two together ... I enjoy that, the whole potential of being able to create, and yet not discarding totally what we have been groomed to learn in school."

Almaz strongly recommends the study of architecture to young women. "It gives us the opportunity to have an insight into so many fields," she says. "In architecture school, we studied sociology, environmental engineering, history of housing, landscaping, management, structure, building technology - while always maintaining design as the main core." She recently returned to her alma mater for a reunion with her former professors and classmates, and was pleasantly surprised to find that some of them were pursuing careers aside from standard architecture; among them are a researcher, an upmarket industrial designer, an architectural critic and a wildlife photographer.

"There are so many things open to you," Almaz enthuses. She said that many students decided early on in their training what they wanted to do; it has very much to do with one's personality, she pointed out. Also, in the course of architectural training, the students receive an "indirect education". They are required to present and defend their projects before audiences. In doing so, they learn to stand up for themselves - something that Almaz is certainly capable of doing.

Almaz Architect handles a variety of projects, ranging from commercial housing developments to private custom designs and renovations. Among the projects for which Almaz Architect has been commissioned is the Primosoft factory, which is presently in the process of construction. She is also working on the proposed Bisikan 1 homesteads for the Lembah Beringin development, and the Seri Alam housing development in Johor Baru.

Almaz takes a sensible approach to her designs. In addition to making them more woman- and child-friendly, "I'm very concerned that the

buildings are designed to be sensitive to our climate," she says. "I try to incorporate elements of tropical architecture into my work. Whatever features I use, it's because we are in Malaysia. Like wide eaves to keep out the sun and the wind ... louvred doors and latticework, so that the house "breathes" ... The features might be different in every building, but the idea is still the same."

Looking to the future, Almaz commented that she is "hoping to be commissioned to do projects that will make a difference ... on a bigger scale, that will make an impact on a bigger percentage of the population."

The eldest of three girls, Almaz feels that she and her sisters have been advantaged because their parents encouraged each of their daughters to be independent. She is especially grateful that her parents never made her and her sisters do "girl things" if they didn't want to; she also feels that it helped that they were never compared to a brother as they were growing up, which she feels can have a significant effect on a young girl's self-esteem.

Almaz regards her mother, Hajjah Esah Hamzah, as a major inspiration. Although born in Kelantan, Hajjah Esah went to school at the MGS Boarding School in Kuala Lumpur because her father, Almaz's grandfather, had wanted his daughters to have an

"I decided I wanted to do everything."

English education. This was remarkable because Hajjah Esah was only nine when she went to MGS. Hajjah Esah, in turn, has instilled the appreciation of a good education in her three daughters.

Almaz remembers fondly that her mother, a domestic science specialist, always told her, "I can't promise you more than a good education." In addition to the educational opportunities she gave



her children, Hajjah Esah is also the font from whom Almaz says she inherited her creativity. Almaz cites in particular her mother's original flower arrangements, recipes and dress designs. The admiration is mutual; Almaz admits modestly that "My mother's always so proud of everything I do."

Almaz also credits her father, Haji Abdul Rahim Yusoff, as a significant influence in making a decision about her career: She wanted "to be a professional, just like him." Haji Abdul Rahim was a civil engineer, working for the government and private sector.

Her professional influences include Kam Pak Cheong, a director at BEP Akitek. She admires what she calls his "undefeatist attitude to design," and tries to emulate it in her own attitude and work. Dato' Kington Loo, another director of BEP Akitek, is another person whom Almaz considers to be a person on whom she models her professional attitude.

Happily married with four children, Almaz has received nothing but steadfast support in all her endeavours from her husband, stockbroker Baharum Mohd Amin. In fact, he was instrumental in her decision to strike out on her own after ten years with BEP.

"We were in the car," Almaz recalls, "and he turned to me and said, 'You know, if you were to go out on your own, you could be very successful.'" His endorsement was all the sweeter because, as she notes, laughing, "Getting praise from him is like getting water from a rock!"

Asked which of her projects she is proudest of, Almaz demurred for a moment before replying with a laugh, "My house extension!" Then she sobered and added, "Because it's me, you know ... I think I'm always proud of my projects at the end, every one of them."

Her philosophy of life is simple. "I think positive. I always look forward ... I try not to regret anything that I've done. If I've made a mistake, I learn from it. You can only get better, you can't get worse! That's what I tell everybody, even my staff ... you can't change the world, you can't change anybody else, but *you* can improve."

According to *Majalah Akitek*, the trade publication of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia or PAM), women architects make up only 10.4 percent of the 1,278 presently registered professional architects in Ma-

Right: Proposed homestead for Lembah Beringin. Below: Proposed factory in Shah Alam that's under construction.



laysia. Almaz was recently featured in the July/August '95 issue of MA, which highlighted a special focus on women architects. In it, she was quoted as saying, "I wish women architects would step forward and join forces to interpret the needs of women and children in the built environment."

She feels she has a responsibility as a woman architect to make a difference in the way buildings are designed, because, she says, men have been designing for the human race all this while. The problem is that men tend to not pay attention to the little things that matter to women, even though women make up 50 percent of the population.

"I'm lucky to be an architect, but let's not forget about our sisters who do not know how to make their environment better for themselves. My responsibility is to them," Almaz states. "It's like having lady doctors, lady (gynaecologists) because she's there, she is carrying out her responsibility to other women, to make them more comfortable ... These are the things we hope we can make a difference (in).

"I feel women and men both contribute to the workforce, but women have the added burden of bringing up children and childbearing, and we have to encourage more facilities for them to breastfeed, to take their children shopping. We're not pampering them, we're just making it easier."

WAW