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PAM embraces change, pushes forward with plans this year

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“It’s not the same as the last time,” says Datuk Ezumi Harzani as he reflects on his second term as president of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM), a position he took up in August last year amid the Covid-19 pandemic. His first term had been in 2018 to 2019.

“Owing to the circumstances, challenges are aplenty [for the industry]. There are not many new projects for architects as launches [and government projects] are limited, with some being put on hold. There are also many design revisions due to affordability [issues] and changes in market demand that has caused disruptions in the market pattern.”

As the light pours into his home office in the clear afternoon, Ezumi tells *City & Country* via Zoom that the professional institute has made plans to diversify and counter the challenges.

“Our immediate plan is to reskill, upskill our members for mediation — through mediator training to support the demand for such a service, in accordance with the provision of the Covid-19 Temporary Measures Act (Act 829) — and arbitration, by training our members to be included in the PAM panel of arbitrators,” says Ezumi, who is director of Kuala Lumpur-based Arkitek MAA Sdn Bhd.

“We are also encouraging our members to take the building inspection training course by Architect Centre Sdn Bhd to be accredited inspectors. Others include the building information modelling (BIM) training, Green Building Index (GBI) training for green and sustainability consultants, and continuous professional development (CPD) through professional practice workshops and webinars.

“Our aim is to provide various job portfolios for our members and to prepare them for the next recovery and boom.”

Current challenges

Despite the Movement Control Order, PAM has organised numerous training courses online and kept active. “We have meetings via Zoom on a weekly basis. In fact, our meetings now appear smoother and more efficient; the technological adoption has been accelerated in a matter of months [in what could have taken years] in the light of the pandemic,” notes Ezumi.

“Across the board, we have noticed an increase [among our members] in the adoption of virtual working platforms such as cloud coordination, virtual private networking and remote access systems when construction professionals and their employees need to work from home,” he continues.

“It also opens the opportunity for construction companies to adopt current construction technologies such as pre-fabrication building systems, modular industrialised building systems, building information management and remote monitoring of construction sites.”

According to Ezumi, architectural practices had already been affected by the economic downturn prior to Covid-19. “The pandemic just increased the impact on them, and they have had to respond to the situation faster. Many firms have been affected financially and they have had to make adjustments to their practices, including downsizing, cutting operational costs and diverting their operations to other parallel activities to generate additional income.

“The pandemic affects firms of different sizes in different ways. Larger firms with diverse portfolios are able to respond quickly to demand as they have more services to offer. Meanwhile, smaller



Ezumi: Our aim is to provide various job portfolios for our members and to prepare them for the next recovery and boom

firms seem to be more flexible and adaptable to different situations. They have the agility to explore various opportunities,” he explains.

In contrast, medium-size firms are likely to have a harder time. “They do not have diverse portfolios nor the adaptability and agility of a smaller firm,” opines Ezumi.

Apart from Covid-19, other concerns of the sector include digital disruption, artificial intelligence and megatrends that will transform the way business is conducted, he says. “For architecture, the immediate concern is with the shrinkage of private sector developments — a lot of housing developments and commercial projects have been affected.

“Many people believe this is probably the time for the market to adjust the property price, which is perceived as too high. However, the property price in our country is still very low compared to that in other countries ... [It is] the low average income of our citizens [that] causes property affordability issues.”

Meanwhile, Ezumi says public awareness of the importance of design and sustainability has improved over the years.

In terms of bright spots, public housing provides opportunities for architects to introduce better housing solutions, he points out. “Nonetheless, the government has to restructure the delivery system to make it effective. Private developers should not be forced to deliver half-hearted subsidised housing. It causes market failure with a lot of overhang in this sector.

“Housing developments have been the main source of jobs for most architects in Malaysia [with most jobs coming from private developers]. However, our affordable housing delivery has not been properly structured. The government depends on private developers to deliver affordable housing, which has proved ineffective,” says Ezumi.

“We hope that the government will implement a structured affordable housing programme where private developers are given options to contribute to funds for affordable housing for the government to deliver.

“We also hope that the government will engage us for proper public housing research, and seriously look into its implementation mechanism. This is the area where PAM can assist the government in developing solutions for public housing. It is not possible to implement it with private developers due to the various objectives, internal policies and scheme sizes of different developers,” he adds. ■