

RED OVERSEAS

AIRBORNE DREAMS: Architect Tan Hin Lin's decision to relocate his office to London has literally allowed his ambition to take flight, judging from the series of international airports bearing his signature



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Faced with a fight or flight situation, what would an architect do? For Ar. Tan Hin Lin, more popularly known as Hin Tan, director of Hinton Associates Limited, the choice was simple. Family considerations and the difficulty of securing sizeable projects sealed his decision to follow the "pull" and "push" factors to set-up his practice overseas.

"They say after ten years of working in one place, you either stay forever or leave. My young daughter was growing up without me in London. Being an absentee husband and dad wasn't the way to go. I didn't wish to have the kind of lifestyle endured by a category of Koreans who send their families to the States but stay back hanging on to their pay cheques.

"Prior to moving to London, there was a lot of long-haul commuting on a regular basis and this could not go on forever. After about three years (of toing and froing between Kuala Lumpur and London), it was time to move," he affirms.

Coupled with what he perceived as another "push factor" was his opinion that "without business and political patronage, an ambitious or talented architect practising in Malaysia would not be able to fly."

"This 'know-who' is not necessarily a curse on architects but a characteristic of how developed we are as a society," reiterates Hin Tan who is now into his third year working in the UK.

Smarting words perhaps, but one certainly cannot fault his strength of purpose and ambition that has seen the successful fashioning of several European airports bearing his signature.

Acknowledging that "starting from ground zero can be a tall order as there are no crutches for one to hang on to", he nevertheless encourages other architects to pursue the inner stirrings of their passion to let their ambitions take flight.

"It can only be a soul-strengthening exercise, a test of how hardy or hungry one is," says this former sixth form student of St. Francis Institution in Malacca and alumni of architecture from the University of Manchester and University of Liverpool, UK.

A self-professed "post-Merdeka child", Hin Tan, 54, says some individuals engage marketing firms or agents to establish their respective practices but he advises teaming up with other established practices for a quick and good way of establishing oneself overseas, provided the chemistry is right.

Now, three years later, Hin Tan, who graduated in 1984 and "survived the Thatcher years in UK" can look back with

a satisfied grin, as the move has proven to be exactly what provided the wind allowing his dreams to take flight. He has previously worked for international firms including Arup Associates, Richard Rogers Partnership, Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners, Santiago Calatrava and GDP Architects in KL.

Dreams taking flight

"Through design, we make this world a better place and through originality of design we make this world a more unique place." This mission statement forms the cornerstone of Hin Tan's practice in his eponymous firm Hinton Associates which specialises in three major areas namely transport architecture of which airport terminals feature greatly, special interiors such as laboratories as well as product design.

Prizing his firm's professionalism, leadership and inventiveness when it comes to the process of creation and design, he asserts that it is this ability to show the meaning of innovation in architectural conception as well as the employment of a flexible approach in searching for solutions in the thorough sense of the definition of the solution that lends the firm its competitive advantage.

When it comes to the bottom line, Hin Tan believes that providing as much information as possible in defining its architecture will effect appropriate cost savings. The need to source the right product and work closely with the industry means that the delivery of the appropriate level of technology pertaining to each project in order to achieve "high quality, value and beauty" can be met.

Having said that, no expense is spared when it comes to adding value to a project by means of engineering and industrial expertise that involves the technical details of fast track building, concrete and steel fabrication techniques coupled with the use of new materials, should a project require these features.

The firm prides itself on its experience in the design and realisation of "functionally and technically complex buildings" such as airports, offices and industrial buildings including long span structures that usher in new design ideas to the building elements like structure, wall and roofing systems.

On the opposite end of the trajectory, the firm also conceives the birth of bespoke interiors as well as involves itself in furniture design.

Accomplishments aside, Hin Tan remains unfazed by his achievements.

"I don't think I have a secret or theory to share. I am not successful.

"I have not been commissioned to design buildings that will last more than 100 years in the City of London. I still have a long way to go."

On being probed further, he disclosed another nugget of information worth pondering.

"I have once been asked if I design for the East or for the West. Herein lies the secret perhaps," he responds thoughtfully given his unique Malaysian-born disposition with a long immersion in Western architectural practice.

The sky's the limit



The Perm Airport, Russia was inspired by the notion of coming home to an igloo. Live images of flight landings will be projected in the imax style facade.

Epitomising the sky as the limit, Hin Tan is a man on a ready mission of carving out his niche practice spanning the areas of masterplanning, architecture, interior and furniture design.

Being a stickler for details, he says that there are no shortcuts to the process. His firm's architectural services is an open book - characterised by the production of detailed drawings complemented by continuous hands-on site involvement in order to enable the realisation of a design to its fullest potential.

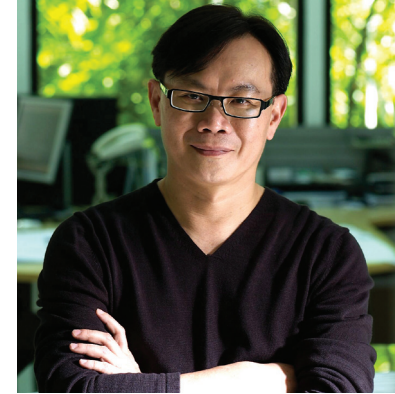
From the launch pad of his Hinton Associates Sdn Bhd office in KL where he worked on and off for about ten years previously, he honed his skills working on interior design projects on homeground and abroad as well as several buildings including the expansion of Senai Airport in Johor.

Always embracing a work culture that is all-encompassing, his belief in executing design and detail development with military-like precision has resulted in two symbiotic processes that are vital to the resulting architecture banking on ingenuity and invention forming the hallmark of the firm's philosophy.

In other words, an extremely high quality of conception from the micro to

the macro is the goal of each project, be it the resulting design of small spaces and objects or the grandeur of big buildings and the masterplanning of large sites.

Pics courtesy of Hinton Associates Limited.



Ar. Hin Tan has every reason to smile as his brand of architectural designs ensures smooth landings for airplaners.

Quick take-offs with Ar. Tan Hin Lin, director of Hinton Associates Limited

Taking destiny into his own hands, Malaysian-born architect Tan Hin Lin or Hin Tan shares some insights into his work, beliefs and aspiration guiding his practice in the UK.



The entrance hall at the Nizhny Novgorod International Airport in Russia was rotated 45 degrees to address the approach to the site complemented by a dramatic public concourse designed at the front.



The Tirana International Airport in Albania represents the grafting of new technology and operational efficiency into a time-forgotten world.

List the airports you've designed worldwide. How do you come up with the concept, aspiration and choice of materials for these airports?

With others: Pier 4 A, Bilbao Airport. Tirana Airport, Senai Expansion, Tyumen, Krasnoyarsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Perm City. The last five airports are in Russia.

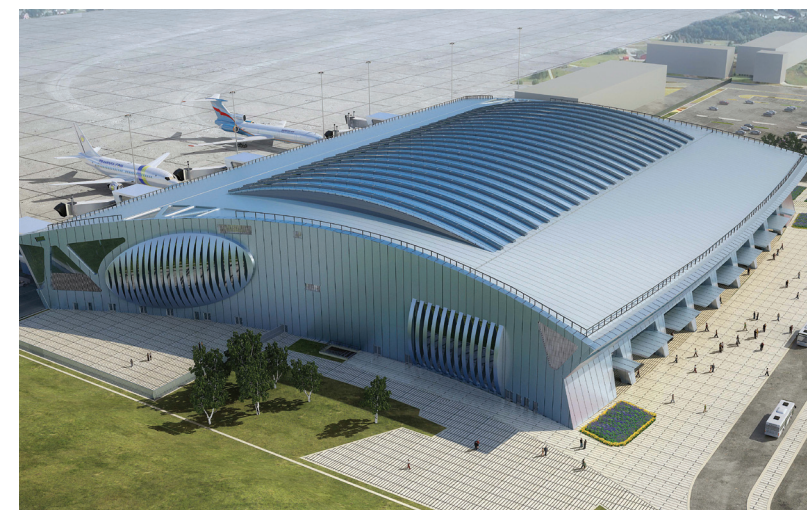
We look at each city and what its climate, geography, history and culture is like and we tailor-make every terminal to reflect its genius loci, or spirit of the place. With every city, we source for locally available materials that can characterise the airport.

Is there a common thread running through the airports you've designed - be it Samara International Airport, Nizhny Novgorod International Airport or the Krasnoyarsk International Airport? Do they each have different characteristics and personalities?

Yes, there is a common thread. It started at Krasnoyarsk, soon after leaving Malaysia. This project offered us an opportunity to re-invent a brave new beginning. KJA was the start of our thinking that all five elevations of a building have to look like one.

In practical terms you could make a paper cut out of this complex shape and fold it into a building. We even made a video showing this folding process. In other words there is a material flow from each side to the roof and over to the other side, just like in a car.

So when you stand and look at this



The Krasnoyarsk International Airport in Russia with its playful but sophisticated form and "punctured" design allows daylight to stream in.

building, you would realise it was designed in the round, not from two dimensions.

If you were to then put this design through a milling machine, you could have the whole form carved out from one block. Such material flow can be found in Gothic and Baroque stone buildings where the miraculous stone pervades with intense energy all over the building forming doorways, grilles and gargoyles, columns, floor, roof and ceilings.

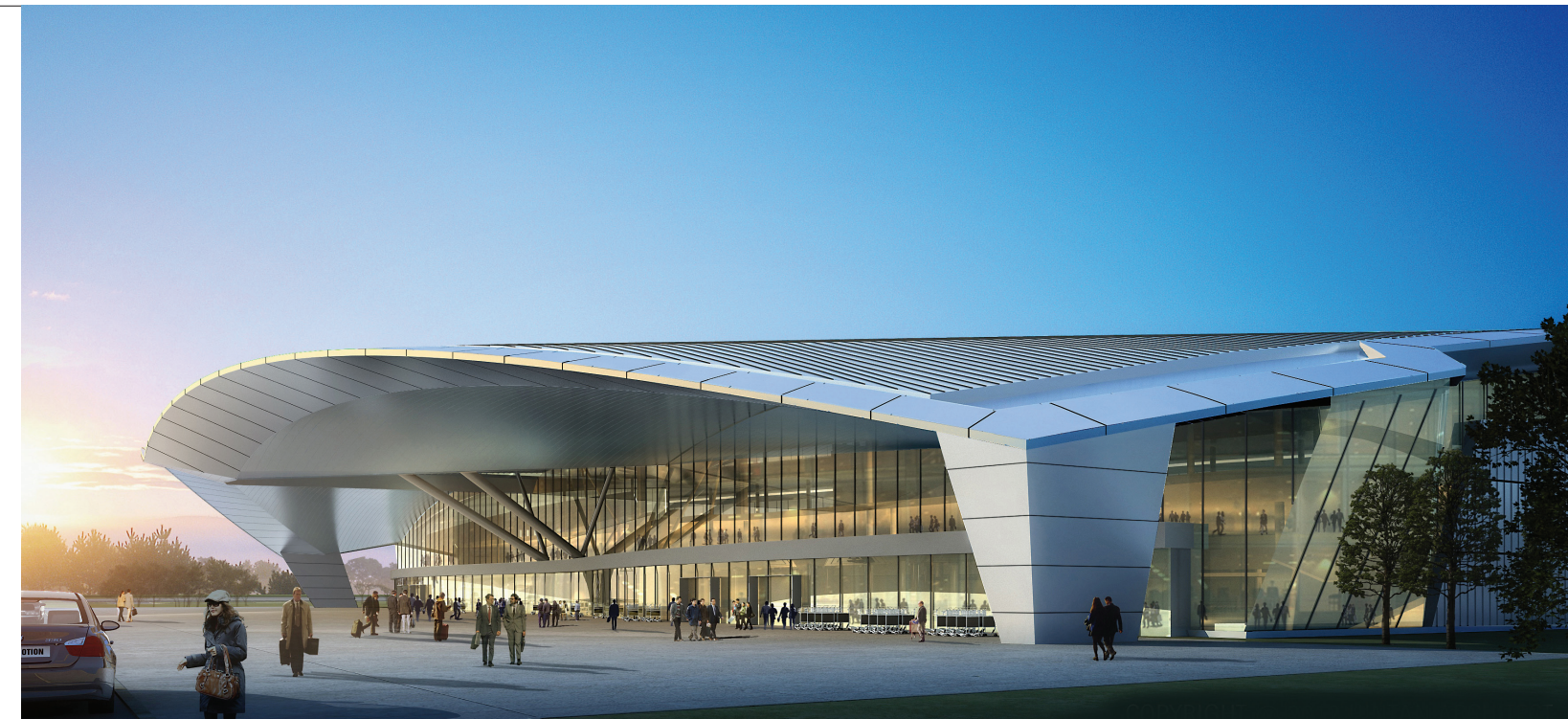
We try to continue this eloquent approach with our subsequent buildings, ensuring that no building should be made from more than two materials. Each terminal gets its personality from the material, form and our site response. Each one is a search for an ideal. Each one is (a) work in progress.

The most important consideration when designing airports?

The most important consideration is the statistics of the airport. This means a variety of current and future figures for domestic and international passengers or their peak hour flow (PHP). Together with the total passengers per annum or PPA, these figures will generally determine the footprint of the terminal. Next in importance comes the passenger flow.

How is designing airports different from residential or commercial buildings?

Airport terminals must be designed to grow and they need to expand sideways usually. When they can no longer



The Samara International Airport, Russia will be a World Cup venue for football in 2016, with its powerful side wings forming the soaring canopy.

be expanded, we add a new terminal and call it B.

How did you manage to secure so many airport projects? What was your first airport project assignment?

By sheer repetition. One has to keep doing the same building type until one becomes an acknowledged master of it. It then adds up to a body of work we call track record. No one will appoint an architect for an airport without a track record for terminal buildings. Likewise, in terms of getting appointed for designing hospitals as they are specialised buildings.

My first airport design was for KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport) when there was a competition held in the UK in the late eighties. I was working for Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners at the time. Following that, I built an extension to Heathrow's Terminal One called the Pier 4A Extension at the end of 1992 which is still there. Later in Paris, I worked on Santiago Calatrava's terminal in Bilbao, Spain. In 2005, I designed the Tirana International Airport in Albania.

What is your approach to work? How do you view your profession?

I am a crafter, a skilled manipulator of an intangible thing called space. To craft space, one has to craft form. This science of form and its inverse space when



Airport terminals must be designed to grow and they need to expand sideways usually, shares Ar. Hin Tan whose firm does airport designs.

understood and honed in our own way defines our architecture with a capital A. We then leave it to the beholder to appreciate or denigrate. My approach is simply to stay focused on what one is good at and to deliver.

What are the frustrations on the job? How do you see architecture evolving in response to modern times?

Often, we are not given the chance to live by our standards or to deliver a project well. Actually, those days are over. We live in the instant world of noodles, quick renders and pdf plans. There is no time for good detailing and craftsmanship, no need for construction drawings at times.

Globally, we're now in the phase of quick construction and disposable architecture, like hospital gloves. And maybe this is the way to go - cheap buildings can be torn down and replaced with new, cheaper ones allowing cities to constantly renew and young "software operators" to have work to do.

The highest compliment you have received for your airport designs?

This came when I was on a flight to Tirana. Just before landing the pilot proudly announced that he was about to land in a most beautiful airport.

Another moment was when the Prime Minister of Albania, during our Pha-

Two opening, asked to meet me and shake my hand for the cameras.

Whose works have inspired you and influenced the way you view architecture?

I remember reading I.M. Pei's book as a student and being hit by his wise words that "Architecture is a compromise. The whole of life is a compromise." Such humility coming from an architect whose pristine works can touch a layman's heart. I find relief from his phrase when things go wrong.

Your favourite types of projects?

I do residential projects but mainly for myself because I know what I want and do not have to pander to anyone else. This is my favourite activity, though (it is not carried out) as often as I would like. It is the most satisfying task for me - making the spaces speak only to me as a projection of my thoughts which only I can understand.

The best and most challenging aspects of running a firm overseas?

For me, the best aspect has to be the fact that there are only two holiday periods in the UK: Christmas to New Year and Easter. This means our work can go on without being abruptly interrupted by yet another holiday. The excessive amount of holidays, as is the case in Malaysia, with almost one each month can severely stunt a small practice.

There is an endless supply of well-qualified architects of various levels that one can choose from a large market. From one small advertisement with RIBA Appointments, we garnered more than 200 applicants for a part-time position!



The new commercial expansion of the Senai International Airport in Johor Bahru, Malaysia flows seamlessly into the existing terminal with its traffic scheme enhancing passenger flow.