

RED PEOPLE

Architect of change



EXIT INTERVIEW: Outgoing PAM president Ar. Hj Saifuddin Ahmad reflects on his two terms of office, steering the institute in the right direction

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Two terms of helming the architecture institute known as PAM or Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia also known as the Malaysian Institute of Architects has gone by in the blink of an eye for outgoing PAM president Ar. Hj Saifuddin Ahmad.

In a candid interview with NST RED, the affable president shared his reflections on having led the shortest presidency term comprising eight months with the smallest council during his first year as president from 2011 to 2012, and ironically, being the president with the largest council (having 13 council members instead of the traditional ten) in the following 2012 to 2013 presidency term.

In a way, fate seems to have favoured the 53-year old president as his efforts have not unduly gone unnoticed. For one, he has been elected by the council to head a new committee with regards to the issue of the influx of foreign consultants, architects and design practices which will compete with local firms for jobs.

"Fortunately or unfortunately," he laughed. "So like it or not, I thought I could run away from this responsibility after my presidency, but I can't," he said tongue-in-cheek.

"I've actually proposed to the council that the committee has to be set up to look into this issue and to come up with certain guidelines to be submitted to the Board of Architects or Lembaga Arkitek Malaysia (LAM) which is the regulating body," he said.

This was one of the main issues he has brought up during his tenure as president.

"On top of heading this committee, I am also overseeing the PAM Tanduk building committee with regard to the new PAM building," he observed, of PAM's future home that will be located adjacent to the New Straits Times office in Jalan Riong, Kuala Lumpur.

Already, the immediate past president of PAM looks like he has his work cut out for him, being appointed the chairman overseeing these two committees.

Perhaps much to the chagrin of his wife, as he had famously mentioned during last year's annual PAM Awards dinner in relation to his presidency that has taken time away from the family. Family aside, it is also opportune for Saifuddin to channel time back to ongoing projects undertaken by his firm, SNO Architects Sdn Bhd.

Currently, the firm is working on Parcel F in Putrajaya, the last parcel of government buildings there, won through a competition some time back.

The firm is famously known for its LEO (Low Energy Office) building for KeTTHA, the Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water in Putrajaya.

This building was conferred the prestigious Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the ASEAN Energy Award in 2006 by the ASEAN Centre for Energy and was privileged to be featured on the Malaysian 50 sen stamp under the Energy Efficiency Building Series.

Come high tide or low water

"When I took over the presidency, although I wanted to embark on a lot of things, I noticed that administratively, there was a lot that needed to be done. My principle is before one can do other things, one has to ensure that one's house is in order.

"There was a lot of revamp in terms of the staff at the secretariat, and also (issues as to) how we spend our funds. Of course, with a lot of these changes or certain decisions that I've made, these might not be popular decisions. But, at the same time, I remember a past PAM president's advice which I've always fallen back on. He told me, 'Saifuddin, you should not think of being popular and pleasing everyone, but at the end of the day, you should think of what's best'."

Admitting that part of him found the presidency to be "a very long journey" while he was at it, part of him is relieved and glad it is over in a way. However, yet another part of him feels that a lot of things has not been completed, which he hopes the new council will continue looking into.

"In years to come, not many people will remember the good deeds you've done," he quipped.

Walking the talk

Saifuddin maintained that he has not gotten any major projects during his term as president as he has split the two roles he played then - as private practitioner and president of the institute and kept them separate. This is despite the assumption by most people that a PAM president will be offered many projects and opportunities.

"As the president, you have to walk the talk. An example of walking the talk is with regards to submitting the request for (project) proposals. In a private practice, whether you like it or not, a majority of clients would like you to submit your proposal before your official appointment. And, this is something that the profession does not condone as architects need to be paid for their services.

"It goes against the rule. The law is that you need to be appointed and paid

for what you've done. However, in the industry, (it has become common whereby) one has to come up with a lot of proposals before being appointed. On top of that, one is not paid for a lot of proposals done."

Other issues

Not one to mince his words, beneath the amicable demeanour, Saifuddin admits to being one to handle issues with an iron hand. There were some major issues that he was concerned about that included the mandatory minimum scale of fees, the recognition of graduates from unrecognised schools of architecture and the influx of foreign consultants.

A Professional Practice Forum was organised last December to discuss these issues.

He observed that the mandatory minimum scale of fees is not practised by certain clients and government linked companies. He also raised concern about the issue of recognition of graduates from unrecognised institutions.

"There are a lot of graduates from even renowned institutions in the US, Korea, Japan and China whose degrees are not recognised by LAM although these are prestigious architecture institutions.

"This has been an ongoing issue since the 80's. So, out of this forum, we are preparing the recommendation to LAM to ensure either there is an amendment to the current process of recognition or to come up with other alternatives. The same is true with the issue of minimum scale of fees, even where the current one is not being practised. Maybe we can come up with another alternative that can be accepted and practised in the industry."

According to Saifuddin, the influx of foreign consultants and architects is also of serious concern as they are competing with our local architects for jobs.

Additionally, another area of concern is where unregistered and graduate architects are undertaking projects by getting registered architects to be their submitting persons.

Time for change

At the time of this interview, as the nation was also gearing up for the 13th General Election,

(GE13), members of PAM were also preparing to cast their votes for the next president.

"Changes are not only in PAM but are also occurring in organisations or committees that are representing the profession. Year in and year out, I've noted that the council positions are being represented by the same people. I've also noted that some of the people are not registered nor are they practising architects or PAM members and yet they are making decisions for the architecture profession," he said earnestly.

"As for the council, it is not the quantity that matters but also the quality, meaning to say that with all due respect to all the council members because I understand that this is a voluntary position, one has to remember that PAM is not just any ordinary institute but one which requires a lot of commitment and a lot of issues that need to be addressed. In order to do so, you need people who are committed."

QUICK TAKES WITH AR. HJ SAIFUDDIN AHMAD, IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT OF PAM

Thoughts on stepping down and your support for the newly elected president?

"I've already told myself that this is not a permanent position so one has to be prepared to let go when the time is up. I have been given my time and have done what I needed to do. As for the new president, I will render my support accordingly.

I've also noted that during my presidency, it has been difficult to please everyone.

Some past presidents had good intentions but to me, one should base the running of the institute to the person in office and at the same time, even if you don't agree as a past president of PAM, to try not to instigate (the current president).

Looking back, would you have done anything differently?

Whether I've done good or bad is not for me to say. I leave it to the public to judge me.

There are a few things which I've embarked on but have not completed but I hope the new president and council will still continue (addressing these issues). If my services are required, I will continue to assist PAM.

What will be the first thing you plan to do once you step down?

I will perform my Umrah, my small Hajj, with my wife and my youngest son.

Highest point of your presidency?

It's still not there yet but I am looking forward to the building of the PAM Centre because I was involved in the PAM competition and am overseeing the project in Jalan Tanduk until its completion.

What do you think was your biggest accomplishment as PAM president?

I brought back PAM's accounts into the black.

