

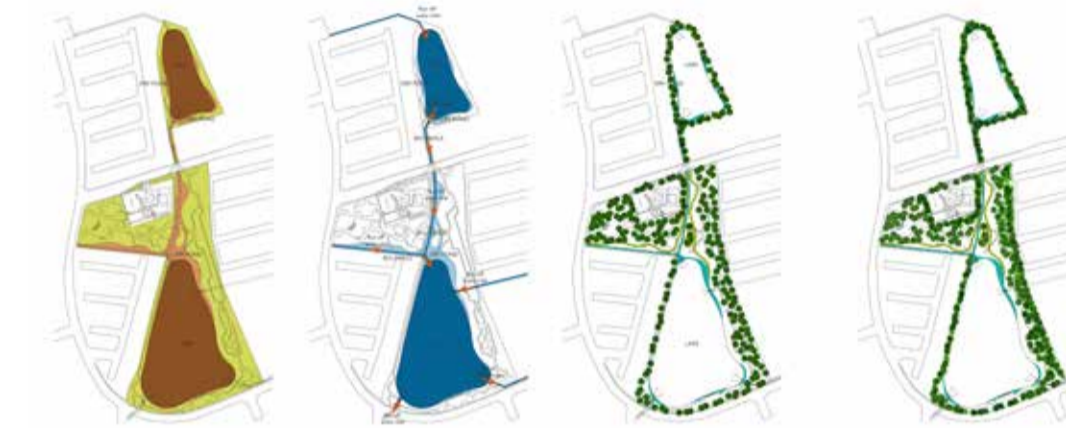
The Cybersouth Central Park brief envisions the site as a communal space amid a sustainable forest ecosystem



Landart's proposal for the park utilises eco-friendly timber materials to engage users with nature



Phua and his team studied diverse aspects of the Cybersouth Central Park site while planning their design strategy



The firm's design for Cybersouth Central Park includes separate contour, water and planting roadmaps to address corresponding aspects of the project



Landart's vision for Cybersouth Central Park encompasses years of development from ex-mining site to thriving ecosystem

Zen and the art of landscape design

Landart Design Sdn Bhd brings landscapes to life with an artistic approach grounded on urban planning principles

Text by ALIFF YUSRI | aliff.yusri@hckmedia.com

The creative aspects of design are typically reserved for interiors and structures, but there also exists a thriving market for artists who view landscapes and greenery as a medium of expression. One such firm, Landart Design Sdn Bhd, has crafted topographies in Malaysia and overseas since 1998, with notable recent projects including MCT Bhd's Cybersouth Central Park in Cyberjaya, Selangor. "I've had a passion for the arts ever since I was a student in primary school. It was an influence from my family, so I grew up in a conducive environment. I started out by drawing, then learned how to paint, often displaying my paintings in the back of the classroom. From there, I studied urban planning in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), where

I was first exposed to the beauty of landscapes," says Landart managing director Phua Chin Eng. **Setting the scene** Drawn to the field, Phua devoted himself to learning more about how landscapes interacted with the social and geophysical elements surrounding them, complementing his diploma in urban and regional planning with a Bachelor's degree in landscape architecture at UTM — one of the first such qualifications offered by an institution in Malaysia at the time. Concluding his tertiary studies in 1996, he began working with landscape architecture and planning consultancies in Singapore before eventually establishing Landart in Penang in 1998. Today,

with more than 18 years of experience — including 16 years as a corporate member of the Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia (ILAM) — the soft-spoken personality is a pillar of the industry, often serving as a judge at the annual Malaysian Landscape Architecture Awards organised by ILAM. Along the way, he has remained active in the domestic arts scene, supporting local talents through a gallery in Aceh Art Row, Penang, along with the Locus art space in Publika, Solaris Dutamas, which houses the Kuala Lumpur branch of Landart as well. Though Locus has since changed hands, Phua continues to apply the sensibilities it espoused throughout the design firm's portfolio. "Creativity, expression and storytelling are central to our approach, which is why we took the



Effective design needs to be interactive, practical and memorable, says Phua

barcode, which we wanted to commemorate. From planting trees to implementing paint patterns and the swimming pool design, we took about 12 years to complete the project, with Bayswater in Parcel A and E-Gate, Platino and Pearl Regency in Parcel B coming together in a grand design when viewed from above," he says. While landscaping is its forte, the firm avoids overspecialisation within a single medium, supplementing its bread and butter with extensive works in the industrial and commercial segments, along with ventures into urban planning with undertakings ranging from the Jelutong Expressway and Bukit Tengah Roundabout on local shores to the Dammam Highway Interchange in the United Arab Emirates. In addition, Phua added interior design to Landart's portfolio in 2003, with a separate team overseeing the continuity of its values and vision within interior environments and built spaces. These are evident in its design for Keysight Technologies Malaysia Sdn Bhd's Bayan Lepas facility, which pairs the factory space with pleasant grey and neutral tones as well as pervasive industrial geometries. "Landscapes constitute about 80% of our work, with interiors accounting for the remaining 20%. I think the two complement each other, and all our designs, whether landscape or interior, begin with a storyboard. Because the architect takes the lead in almost every aspect of a project, if he or she doesn't have a story to tell, then that space will lack soul," he says.

Putting it into practice

At Landart, successful design is based on several core tenets, including interactivity, functionality and memorability, as Phua reasons that a space must engage its users or buyers in both practical and aesthetic terms to stand the test of time. In this respect, he was inspired by film director Ang Lee, who defined a good movie as something that a viewer watched for two or three hours but would remember for the rest of their life.

These tenets are present in the firm's proposal for Cybersouth Central Park, which took home first prize as well as the landscape consultancy contract for the project following a five-month ILAM competition. The contest encouraged participants to submit designs focusing on the park as a recreational hub amid a sustainable forest ecosystem while retaining existing site features.

"The site itself spans about 19 acres of land, with water features occupying 10 acres. We wanted to immerse the park's users in the present, past and future by creating a palimpsest, while acknowledging Starbucks founder Howard Schulz's idea of the third place — a community space between work and home, which represent the first two places that everybody needs in their life," says Phua.

The Landart team's palimpsest concept — which

name 'Landart'. UTM laid a foundation for my own approach to landscape architecture, and that has evolved throughout the years as I learned and grew, with the philosophy of design and ecotourism principles gradually having more emphasis," he says. "These principles determine how we utilise existing natural resources in a given setting to bring out the potential of the landscape. I began exploring them at UTM during a six-month landscaping project along Sungai Jelai, Pahang, which was one of the inspirations behind our design for MCT's Central Park in Cyberjaya."

A prolific portfolio

Since its establishment, Landart has contributed towards dozens of projects across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates, including the Royal Perak Golf Club, Gurney Plaza and the Light Linear Park in Penang as well as the Pantai Cermin Water Theme Park in Medan.

One of these projects, the Bayswater Resort Condominium in Gelugor, is representative of Phua's approach as a whole, with Landart incorporating a "barcode" aesthetic into the topography of the development itself through the use of repeated linear elements to emphasise Bayswater's urban living concept.

"This was during the transition period when Malaysia was converting from a price tag system to the

refers to a work that has been reused or altered while preserving elements of its earlier form or characteristics — highlights the natural and cultural identity of the Central Park site by tracing its roots as tropical peatland and secondary forest, developing through a period of habitation by Temuan orang asli tribes as well as 80 years of tin-mining operations and subsequent disuse.

Looking to the future

"We also studied the routes of migratory bird species from China to Australia, with the site acting as a 'springboard' to help them in their journey. To ensure project viability, we laid out five- and 10-year planting strategies, while exploring things like how water discharges from the surroundings into the lake and combining two bodies of water into a single biomimicry pond as part of a holistic ecosystem," says Phua.

Landart conducted precedent studies on similar sites throughout the nation to plan their strategies, including the Forest Research Institute Malaysia's Tin Tailing Afforestation Centre in Bidor, Perak, which developed cost-effective tree planting techniques on former mining land, along with Taman

Wetlands, Putrajaya and Ara Damansara Eco Park, Petaling Jaya in Selangor.

In preserving the cultural heritage of the orang asli formerly extant in the area, Phua and his team included extensive references to the crafts favoured by the Temuan tribe, who often wove processed screwpine leaves into distinctive baskets. These weave patterns are duplicated in the flow of the park's pathways, as well as its pavement and shelter designs, which also use eco-friendly timber materials to emulate the tribe's closeness to nature.

Aside from Cybersouth Central Park, the firm's current portfolio includes projects in the central and northern regions, including Kedah and Langkawi. Moving forward, Phua remains sanguine about market prospects, though he shares that Landart's Kuala Lumpur branch sees more opportunities compared to its Penang office in terms of project sizes and budgets.

"In the end, what I want to accomplish with Landart was to establish a shared platform for people who love the arts, who are passionate about design and would like to create better living environments. If that sounds good, we look forward to working with you," he concludes. ■



The firm's Bayswater design incorporated a "barcode" aesthetic into the topography of the development itself