

HEARING Kenny Tan talk about creating narratives in his projects, one is compelled to ask the group chief executive of Link (THM) Group what his favourite story is. A bungalow in Bukit Timah is his immediate answer. It is not that the project is extremely big, by bungalow standards – the house stood on a plot of land slightly above 5,000 sq ft – but it is the thought that went into it.

“I wanted to give this home a wow factor,” says Mr Tan. “One that will make the owner proud to bring friends home.”

Mr Tan decided to excavate the land, which was one floor above road level, thus introducing a basement at the road level. “I designed the house with a centre opening . . . With an air well in the centre of the home, I linked the front and the rear building with a bridge, so this allows light to enter the basement. And I built a swimming pool in the basement.”

That is not all. The basement also offers covered parking for six cars, a luxury usually afforded to larger bungalows, Mr Tan is quick to point out.

Imagine, he says, when coming from the car park into the foyer, the first thing that you see is a glass lift which can fit eight people, and the lift is surrounded by water.

“So when your guest comes to your house, he only sees a swimming pool and a lift. It looks like a resort or a hotel,” he says with a laugh. “This made it the talk of the town!”

This house was built back in 2006.

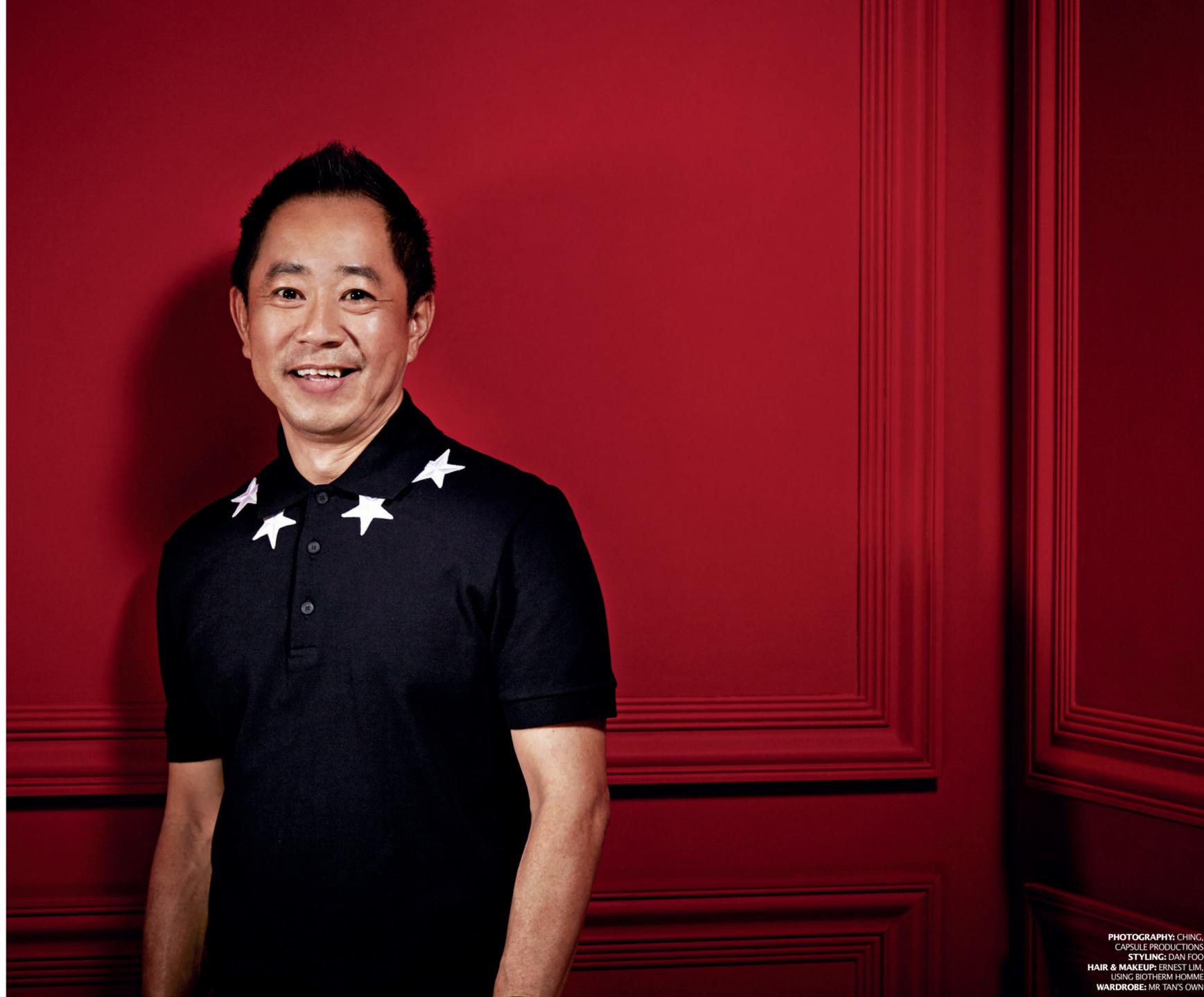
THE DESIGN IMPERATIVE

“We don’t just build. We build with a concept. We don’t just design, we design with thought,” says Mr Tan. “And we don’t run property development like (other) property developers. We run it with branding. If you look at most of the houses or businesses we run, we package it. We always ask ourselves, how do we sustain our branding? How do we bring our branding into the product?”

He adds: “To us, image is very important.”

This principle is something that he adopted while in Japan, says Mr Tan, who, in the 1990s, spent a number of years trying to build up his fashion distribution business, which is currently helmed by his wife.

“In Japan, packaging is very important. You buy a Japanese product and you are already impressed, not by the content, but by the first look of the product. And the first look comes from the packaging. That sparks the interest. And if you unwrap the packaging, and you find that there’s quality inside, you will be fully convinced. Content



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, CAPSULE PRODUCTIONS
STYLING: DAN FOO
HAIR & MAKEUP: ERNEST LIM, USING BIOTHERM HOMME
WARDROBE: MR. TAN’S OWN

BUILDING AN IMAGE

Property developer Link (THM) Group’s Kenny Tan learnt about the importance of packaging from his years in Japan **BY MINDY TAN**

comes last. That’s what I was taught after seven years in Japan.

“So everything I do, you can see, starts from the outside packaging.”

HIS MIND ON MEDINI

This is fully amplified in Mr Tan’s ambitious S\$1 billion development, One World Medini, which is located in Medini in Iskandar. Its highlight is a “seven wonders” retail segment which will be split into seven cultural themes: Japan, India, Korea, China, Europe, the United States and a Malay palace.

Located at the “doorstep” of Pinewood Iskandar Malaysia Studios – an integrated media production studio facility that was developed following a strategic agreement with the government of Malaysia’s investment holding

arm Khazanah Nasional Berhad – Mr Tan holds lofty dreams of his “seven wonders” featuring as backdrops in Pinewood’s films.

Mr Tan has further projected that the studio is able take on between three and five film projects at any one time – and assuming that each project brings in a crew of 300 to 500 personnel – this should provide sufficient footfall to the retail and food and beverage shops.

This, he notes, is in addition to the support from tourists who visit LegoLand and Hello Kitty Land; the small and medium-sized enterprises that may spill over into Malaysia because of high production costs in Singapore; and EduCity.

Indeed, education is another sector to look out for in Iskandar, with the main campuses for MDIS Iskandar, University of Reading and Raffles

“WE DON’T JUST BUILD. WE BUILD WITH A CONCEPT. WE DON’T JUST DESIGN, WE DESIGN WITH THOUGHT.”

– Kenny Tan, group chief executive of Link (THM) Group



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN



▲ LIFE’S LESSONS
Mr Tan spent a few years in Japan building a fashion distribution business which is currently helmed by his wife (top, left); he has drawn from those years lessons that he now applies to his property development business (left)

American School to be completed at the end of this year, and expected to add another 2,000 to 3,000 international students to EduCity.

The integrated development will also feature office space, which Mr Tan has designed to have smaller floor plates of between 550 and 1,200 sq ft.

“Why are we targeting small-sized operators with our small floor plates? Because of the vicinity. We are supporting Pinewood Studios and we know that down the road, with more and more filming, there will be a lot of support companies. These firms are small operations, usually with three to 10 staff. So what we are building and developing is to cater to these support companies. We are launching very, very soon – just finding the right time to launch it,” says Mr Tan.

Link THM will likely remain focused on Medini

for the next couple of years, says Mr Tan, noting that One World Medini is currently just Phase 1. “Besides Phase 1 development, we do have option land beside our current development. It’s an expansion plan. So inclusive of the option, that project will easily keep us busy over the next six years.”

MAKING LINKS

Not that Medini alone is going to keep him busy. For instance, the company has plans to list through the reverse takeover (RTO) of Ocean Sky International in a deal worth S\$226 million.

“My interest is to grow the business,” says Mr Tan. “I’m a guy who can’t sit still. What I’m doing (now) . . . are my passions in design and property development. So moving on, to grow the organisation, I’m choosing the RTO deal as the best route for the company.

“It allows the company first, recognition . . . when you are listed on the SGX (Singapore Exchange) in Singapore. Second, the recognition staff get when they work for a listed company. So moving on, it adds branding to the company.”

It also helps the company further venture overseas. The company already has an eye on Myanmar where it hopes to embark on development opportunities in partnership with the locals.

“We are talking to some potential parties for development, also talking to some parties with regard to hotels, how to do additions and alterations because that will provide us with the shortest time to completion,” says Mr Tan.

While he is open to development opportunities, particularly in the residential and commercial spaces, Mr Tan admits that he is more keen on addition and alteration projects in the office and hotel spaces.

“Myanmar is in a period of transition, and for me, timing is money. The shortest time you take to complete a project, the better. So we are looking for projects where we can do some addition and alteration works, revamp the usage, and increase the efficiency of the building. That’s our main focus in Myanmar.”

Meanwhile, he is willing to cool his heels on the Singapore market, and wait for the right timing. “We started in Singapore as a real estate developer, so we will not neglect this market. We have always believed strongly in the economic growth of Singapore. Singapore will still be our main playground,” he says.

“In Singapore, if you look at the cost of involvement in developing a project now compared with 10 years ago, of course costs are getting higher. But Singapore’s potential is also higher. The population is growing and the government is targeting to increase our population to increase our economic growth. Also land is scarce, so we don’t have much land for development. So we can only look at smaller scale, small pocket developments.”

He concludes: “My passion and interest for property has no end. Today, Link is in the Singapore market. We are entering the Malaysian market. And next, we are targeting Myanmar – and I do foresee the possibility of going farther than that.” ■



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

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