

# This East Malaysian house showcases beauty in the ordinary

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By Wong Li Za



The Borneo Mansion in Kuching, Sarawak, by Design Network Architects, is inspired by the Bornean landscape. Photos: Lin Ho

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Nestled in a neighbourhood of terrace houses built in the 1950s in Kuching, Sarawak, the Borneo Mansion's arresting facade is a standout.

But ostentatious it is certainly not. Embracing its green surroundings, the double-storey house is designed to capture the ethereal quality of the Bornean ambience.

"The design was inspired by the beautiful natural landscape of Borneo. We were especially intrigued by the beauty of light and shadow, and the filtering effect they had on the natural green environment", said architect William Khoo of Design Network Architects.

Borneo Mansion incorporates concepts of textures and layers found in the Borneo tropics into functional living spaces. The creative layering of plants within and outside the house offers up a refreshing ambience while giving dimension, depth and privacy. Family activities are centred around the landscaped courtyard.

The use of contrasting materials, textures and greenery is a consistent theme throughout the house.

Completed last year, Borneo Mansion received an Honourable Mention in the 2019 PAM Awards (single residential category) given out by the Malaysian Institute of Architects.

At the heart of the house is its central courtyard – anchored by a coral tree – around which the living area, family room and kitchen are positioned.

A notable feature of the overall design is the edgy, faceted metal facade, which is reminiscent of the jagged limestone formations known as the Pinnacles in the Mulu National Park in Sarawak. The faceted metal facade, as seen from inside the house. Photo: Design Network Architects

"The design of the front façade was not meant to be a direct re-interpretation of the Mulu Pinnacles, though many people often allude to that imagery.

"The physical form of the screen, when seen at a certain angle, appear to be very edgy and sharp. Hence, it reminds them of the Pinnacles. The main reason for the screen's design is more structural rather than purely aesthetics", explained Khoo.

He added that the screens were perforated steel panels that were shaped into sharp folds in order to make it more structurally strong to hold its own weight.

"These were meant to be sun-shading devices that shielded the living room from the sun."

Apart from its Bornean inspiration, the house also reflects the nature and character of its owner, an avid traveller and collector of paintings and other artworks. The mansion's bright and breezy living area celebrates the luxury of Borneo's ample open spaces. Photo: Lin Ho

“His rather humble persona but rich life experience are further represented in the predominant use of concrete, a humble construction material, to construct the home. That is also aligned with the Borneo narrative ‘to see beauty in the ordinary’ , added Khoo.

One design challenge faced was in getting the best utilisation of not just indoor, but also outdoor spaces.

“For example, with the poolside pavilion, we wanted to orientate the pool area to take advantage of the peripheral spaces left over by the building setback bylaw. We wanted to utilise these setback spaces for a more meaningful usage as facility spaces, which we term as ‘outdoor rooms’,” explained Khoo.

A building setback is the distance which a building or other structure is set back from a street or road, a river or other stream, or any other place which is deemed to need protection. Greenery is found in abundance within and outside the house, the lap pool included. Photo: Design Network Architects

“In the tropics, outdoor spaces are important social spaces that are used frequently to hold events. We designed these setback spaces also as garden pathways that are beautifully landscaped to allow clients to access the central courtyard from their respective car porch or drop-off areas.”

In general, Khoo said that the Borneo narrative has become an important design discourse for many architects and designers practising in Sarawak these days.

“Most modern designers today are more acutely aware that our design solutions need to be responsive to the contextual setting of our local building conditions.

“The design has to not only be functional but also culturally relevant to users and the community that it serves.”

“In Borneo, we believe we have the luxury of ample open spaces. We are not living in crowded urban concrete jungles like many cities in West Malaysia.

“Kuching is blessed for being green, a garden city with a beautiful waterfront. The quality of openness is expressed not only in its environment but also socially, where there is a more harmonious community with (generally) good race relations among its culturally diverse populations. The rich mix of ethnicity in the community has been an inspiration for the Borneo Mansion.”

Khoo said Borneo Mansion gives a different meaning to the word luxury.

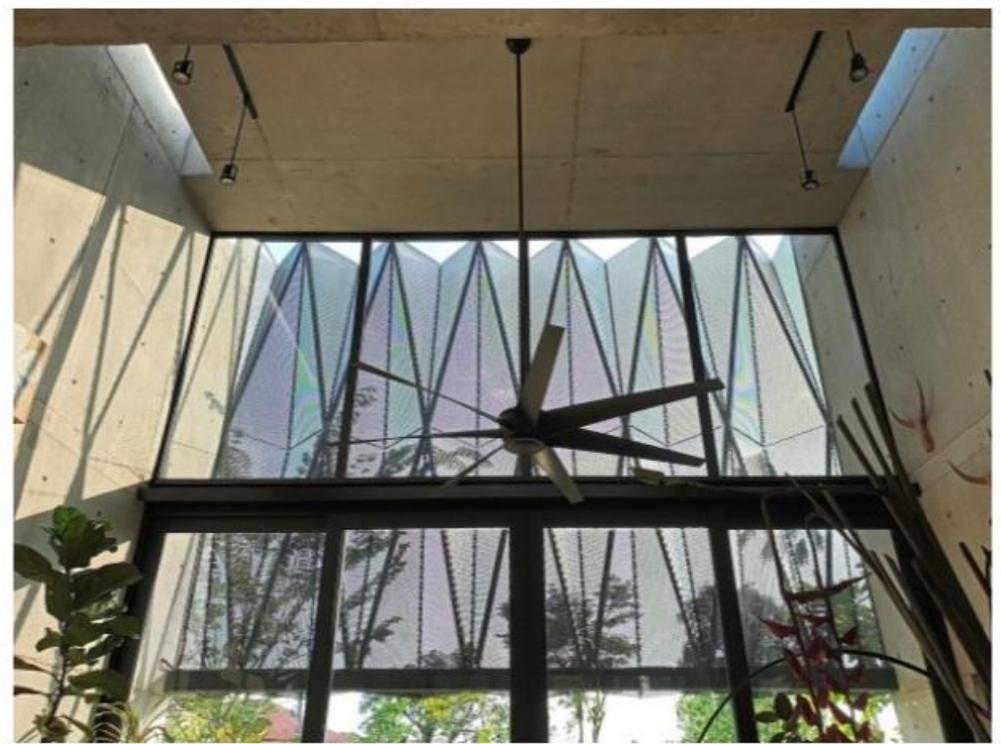
“Here, we see luxury being defined in a fresh new way with the use of ordinary concrete as the main building material. The richness of contrast expressed in the use of many different materials and textures – that is the luxury of Borneo”, he said.

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The faceted metal facade, as seen from inside the house. Photo: Design Network Architects



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Family activities are centred around the landscaped courtyard. Photo: Lin Ho



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