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Subur Tiasa

architect

Design Network Architects

The corporate head office for Subur Tiasa Holdings Sdn Bhd in Sibu, Sarawak built into what would have been a typical Sibu shophouse block is an excellent example of what can be achieved through the thoughtful manipulation of a conventional, efficient, tried and tested space planning method - the double - loaded linear floor plan - which, combined with a client's willingness to depart from fixed vernacular conventions, is able to produce a masterpiece of light and space in a context infamous for its functional pragmatism that is the mien of Sibu town since its early days as a timber trading centre.¹ When DNA received the commission to undertake interior space planning for Subur Tiasa in 1999, the building had already been given planning approval and piling works had begun. Nevertheless, the design team was able to manoeuvre the interior planning away from the technical constraints other than retaining the facade and minor re-piling to the foundation work.

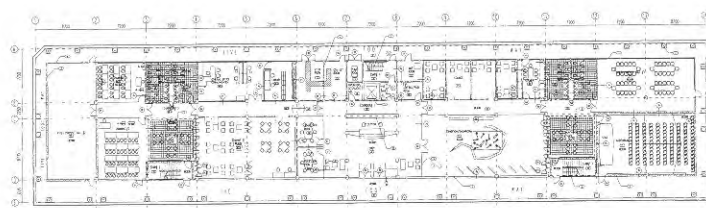
¹ The term 'Vernacular' here is used to mean the tried and tested way of doing things in a localised environment, in this case, an office environment in a typical Malaysian shophouse block.

Design Intention and Concept

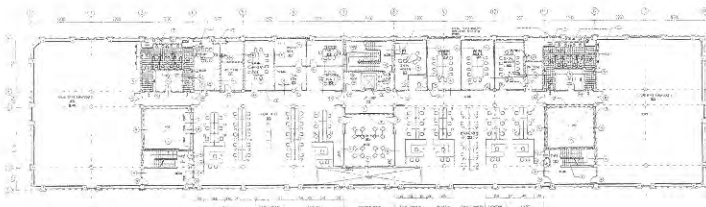
The prime objective of the design is for the corporate headquarters to be the showpiece for Subur Tiasa and accommodating a company with a growing international clientele. On this basis, the architect's design intention was "to create a subtle and elegant work environment that is unique and different from the external architecture without resorting to excessive grand gestures." The resulting design, completed in June 2001, has achieved this objective through the judicious distribution of open planning and enclosed spaces in combination with clean lines and clear planes, the rhythmic orthogonal layering of space and the restrained and sensitive use of light, materials, colours and tonal gradations. The spatial structure is organised around two atrium spaces joined by a Corridor Spine at every floor. For the efficient control of energy consumption, each floor is organised into three zones - Central, East and West zones. The East and West zones are also designated as spaces for multi-purpose group activities and reserved for future expansion.



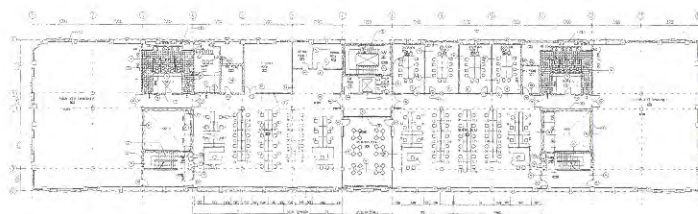
- 1 & 5 Coffee bar at atrium courtyard.
- 2 Louvred panel det
- 3 View from top of atrium courtyard; Coffee bar shown the left of photog
- 4 View looking up of l atrium courtyard.



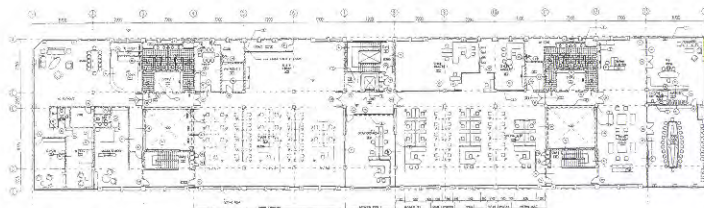
Ground Floor Plan



1st Floor Plan



2nd Floor Plan



3rd Floor Plan



6 & 8

View of the staff lounge; the slanted glass panel and 'object' is a magazine rack.

7 The internal colour scheme is muted with wall panels in 'agathis' (some with built-in light).



The Corridor Spine

The clarity of this work environment unfolds through the way the designers have manipulated the material and spatial characteristics of this Corridor Spine, which on plan, looks deceptively like any conventional double-loaded linear floor plan. To this corridor spine are attached all the workspaces and Mechanical & Electrical rooms. The Spine is released at all floors into the East and West Atria which anchors the whole spatial organisation with columns of light and air. On the ground, these columns serve as public gathering places - a staff lounge at the East Atrium and an exhibition space to the West.

The Wall

The Corridor Spine of each floor is defined by walls; the design, construction, and material specifications of which are determined by the spatial characteristics and workspace programme attached to them. The Wall is the key to the uniqueness of this project, the one element in the total design concept for the work environment that has enabled the architects to develop variations and engender precise 'context sensitive' changes at every turn of phrase and emphasis demanded by the various functions of the workplaces. This simple but highly structured concept

also introduces a versatile framework for changes to occur not only to function-related conditions for each work environment but also to that of time - it is able to accommodate the future evolution of the corporation's workplace without losing its innate spatial and architectural qualities.

The Finishing Touch

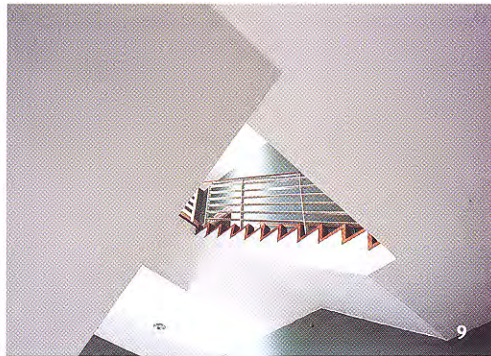
The Wall is an interplay of three visual characteristics - transparency, translucency and opacity. This is achieved through careful composition of clear float or sand-blasted glass in natural anodized aluminium frames with horizontally-emphasised mullions, gypsum board dry wall, fine timber veneer or painted Medium Density Fibreboard finishing panels and touches of sandstone cladding. The transitions between materials are carefully nurtured through simple details to create clearly defined vertical planes. One such detail that flourishes throughout the building is the finishing panel floating off from its dry wall base by a few centimeters and detailed with a subtle shadow gap to create a relief effect, a visual planar language of foreground/background layering.

This interplay of thin opaque slithers of subtly coloured relief planes are released into the depth of rooms by the transparent and translucent

9 Service stairs.

10 Auditorium - the timber ceiling panel conceals the projector which is lowered via a scissor lift.

11 Reception counter with an oversized glass panel as backdrop.



10



11



glazed walls. These transitions in depth are indicative of the change in function of the rooms behind these walls - from service rooms and rooms serving the more private functions which are generally loaded to the south of The Corridor Spine - to the general administrative workplaces which occupy the North and addresses the Street.

Transitions between the vertical and horizontal planes are similarly treated to avoid uncontrolled clashes at floor-wall-ceiling junctions. In addition to this, strips of recessed ceiling lighting are arranged generally in perpendicular formation to the The Corridor Spine and provides a staccato counter-rhythm to the broad linearity of the vertical wall planes. The generally opaque South Rooms have a panoramic view of the River, vestiges of which may appear from the North Rooms or as one glides along the Corridor Spine where breaks in the opacity of the South Rooms occur. This effect was deliberately designed into the depth of the ground floor Lobby where visitors and employees alike have a glimpse of the River as they enter the building from the Street.

Space and Light

The simple compositional rules and detailing that the architects have used intelligently in the planning and design of this 4-storey corporate work environment gives one the impression that it is one continuous flow

of Space manifested through layers of Light. It is a refreshing piece of well-thought out interior architecture which did not have to try too hard to be different from its given context. To say it is modern or contemporary look would be an understatement because of its context - Sibu town - this would mean comparing it to a piece of work in Sydney or London. What is most compelling about this work to the reviewer is the thought process that informed the moves made by the architects. It is modern because of the clarity of that process, the consistency of its logic that not resulted in whimsical notions about being or wanting to be modern is this clarity, and the quality of thought that makes it comparable to work being done in cities of our modern protagonists, not just because looks like a corporate office in Singapore or Tokyo. The finished look is merely an embellishment of that process whose embodiment is in the character and quality of the resulting spaces, not in how it looks - a point that is consistently overlooked in the local practice of architecture in Sarawak in particular. As such, the architects have indeed succeeded in achieving the client's as well as their own objectives without resorting to grandiose, or we might add, whimsical gesturing.