

Link grows with innovative designs

From a small fashion distributor just 20 years ago, the award-winning property firm is now collaborating with Pinewood Iskandar Malaysia Studios for its first overseas venture worth S\$1 billion. By HO WEN QI JANE, TAN E-YANG and TAN ZE SHAN

"IN business, you don't wait. There's no business that comes to you, you have to go and find business," says Kenny Tan, CEO of Link (THM) Holdings. It is this willingness to adapt to circumstances and venture out of comfort zones that has set the foundation for much of Link's current success.

Link was a winner of the Enterprise 50 Awards in 2014 – a recognition of its success as a boutique property developer in Singapore. Having completed more than 50 projects, Link's prominent works include luxury residential properties in the Holland Road and Bukit Timah areas and commercial properties such as Sultan Link at Mohamed Sultan Road.

Crucially, what sets Link apart from its competitors is the emphasis on design innovation in all of its properties, coupled with functionality.

On the road to success

Link (THM) did not start off as a property developer. It began as a fashion distributor in Singapore in 1994. Subsequently, it ventured into Sumatra, Indonesia, where it acquired distributorship rights from Singapore-based agencies in major brands such as Le Must De Cartier, Mont Blanc Writing Instruments, MCM and Valentino leather goods.

From there, Mr Tan diversified into the Japanese market in 1996 because he felt that the firm "could not stop there (in Indonesia)", an indication of his desire to continue expanding his business.

In 2002, having gone through the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the dotcom crisis in 2000, Mr Tan decided to diversify his business and ex-



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plored the prospect of investing in the property market. "We could not invest everything into the same basket, so I decided to diversify from there," explains Mr Tan.

However, he did not dive into the industry immediately. Being a cautious person, Mr Tan spent 18 months researching the sector before eventually entering the property market in the second quarter of 2004.

Link (THM) started off developing

landed properties in the Holland Road and Bukit Timah areas, focusing on user-friendly designs that incorporated a "wow" factor. Houses were equipped with sizeable electronic elevators, substantial parking spaces, and even home automation systems to cater to the ageing population. This innovative design concept quickly attracted the attention of major contractors, property owners and even prominent architects. This established

Link's brand in developing landed properties.

From landed properties, Mr Tan ventured into commercial and light industrial properties. One major project that made headlines was Sultan Link, built on a 15-year leasehold plot located on Mohamed Sultan Road.

Sultan Link consisted of six buildings, each of which could be leased in its entirety and named after the lessee company. Most developers felt that 15-year leasehold was too short and would not earn returns, but Mr Tan had a different strategy.

"We want branding for the company, and to showcase this concept to the public," he explains. "And what this does for the company is to bring us to another milestone."

Mr Tan was proven right by the overwhelming response to the project. Majority of the office space within the six buildings were leased out even before completion.

Venturing outside Singapore

Again, Link (THM) did not sit on its laurels, going on to explore opportunities outside Singapore. Its success was affirmed when it clinched a prime site in Medini, Iskandar Malaysia, in 2013 and the S\$1 billion project, One World Medini, was conceptualised.

One World Medini is an integrated mixed development project located within Iskandar Malaysia, close to Legoland. Once completed, it would stand at the doorstep of Pinewood Iskandar Malaysia Studios, a strategic alliance of the world famous Pinewood Studios Group and the government of Malaysia's investment holding arm Khazanah Nasional. Working with Pinewood Studios, which has been credited with blockbuster movie productions such as the Harry Potter and James Bond series, has raised Link's profile further.

The highlight of One World Medini is the "7 Wonders" tourism concept. It would showcase seven cultures, architectural styles and landscapes from seven different countries and regions – Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, Europe, China, the United States and India.

For example, the retail shops located within "Japan" would boast Japanese architectural designs and sell Japanese related food and clothing brands. The "7 Wonders" can cater to Pinewood Iskandar Malaysia Studios, which could film on the streets of any of the seven countries, instead of having to build an artificial set from scratch. Mr Tan adds: "To our clients who come here and shop, what is the benefit? You can see celebrities."

One World Medini would be the first environmentally-friendly project in Iskandar Malaysia. Embodying an open concept design with no air-conditioning, it would incorporate a wide roof that could bring down the temperature by 3-5 degrees Celsius. Rainwater that falls into the "water catchment" river will be recycled.

"One can shop here even when it rains and it would create a dramatic rain water effect through the roof canopy's centre opening into the water catchment river, connecting the indoor experiences with outdoor elements," adds Mr Tan.

With this innovative design concept, the One World Medini project has been awarded the GreenRE certification from REHDA GreenRE, an initiative to promote green buildings in Malaysia. In 2015, the One World Medini project also received an award from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia in recognition of its efforts to boost the tourism industry in Malaysia, in particular Johor.

The innovative designs incorporated in OneWorld Medini, along with the "7 Wonders" tourism concept, emphasise Link's focus on originality and creativity, rather than pure functionality. With its expected completion in 2019, Link's presence will further extend into South-east Asia.

Growth plans

In spite of its growing portfolio, Link (THM) has maintained a relatively small but strong management team in its headquarters. Most of the employees have been with the company since day one. However, their portfolios and work scope are regularly rotated.

Mr Tan explains: "I don't want them to get stagnant. I don't want them to live in a comfort zone where there's no more challenge or no more innovation." In this way, the staff are constantly challenged and provided with opportunities to upgrade their skills.

Link (THM) continues to push boundaries as it seeks to expand beyond Singapore's shores. There are plans for an eventual listing on the Singapore Exchange, to secure funding for the next stage of the company's growth.

Crucially, Mr Tan's ability to adapt readily to the challenges of a fast-paced and multifaceted industry is what has set Link apart from its competitors. With this competitive advantage, Link (THM) Holdings is well positioned to grow even further in the years ahead.

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