

Innovation a key to success

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Developers should think innovatively about spaces

Property developers need to deliver more than just bricks and mortar

With consumer sentiment dampened by increases in fuel prices and interest rates last year, it is vital that developers do their utmost to build homes that will stand up to the most discerning demands. In order to compete, we need to be innovative and think out of the box.

The property sector as a whole suffered a down cycle in the last two years, with sales reportedly declining about 7.6% to RM28bil on the back of a weak domestic demand.

Stock overhang units, which are completed units issued with certificates of fitness that are unsold after nine months, have also increased, although many of these are properties priced below RM150,000.

Still, while these grim figures warrant serious introspection on the part of developers, it is not all bad news. The high-end market, on the other hand has returning strong numbers and foreign investors are starting to turn their attention to Malaysia. It is encouraging, too, that the government has recently come up with a slew of incentives and policy changes in an effort to stimulate the market.

With high net worth individuals and foreign buyers inclined to be more discriminate in their expectations of a property, developers need to take a critical look at how we can introduce inventive yet practical ideas

into the homes that we build.

One such innovation in the local market is the design of courtyard homes. Courtyard houses have a long history and have been in use for almost as long as man has been building homes. Courtyards afford private open spaces that are protected by buildings or walls. Usually located right in the centre of the house, they introduce air and light to our homes and provide safe area for our children to play and tranquil sanctuaries where we can unwind after a frenetic day at work.

A narrow slice of land, perhaps ten feet wide running down the length of a house, is usually not terribly functional in terms of the different things that can be done with it. But take that same amount of space and put it into an enclosed courtyard area that is nearer in shape to a square and the possibilities just multiply.

As a child, I grew up in a home that was both functional and down to earth. It had no odd corners, just big open spaces that were very welcoming. It had openings along the top parts of the walls, creating a cross ventilation that provided lots of breeze and light inside.

Sometimes the best innovations are those that retain rather than discard, centuries old traditions. According to feng shui principles, sharp angles and nooks and crannies can slow down the flow of energy causing the energy to stagnate and the surroundings to become unhealthy. Innovative homes, therefore, would be free of designs that encourage the accumulation of dormant energies. They would, instead, lean towards open spaces that are rectangular in shape and generous in outlook.

Thinking back to my old house, I also remember many happy moments playing outside with the kids in my neighbourhood. It was a time when families bonded with each other and had a sense of connection with others living in the vicinity. Nowadays developers need to think creatively so that we can provide this simple unadulterated joy to our children.

Developers should think innovatively about effective use of space for the whole development. Instead of just focusing on areas that can be sold more emphasis should be placed on how the whole development can enrich the lives of its residents. Provision of practical green spaces for example will encourage children and adults alike to enjoy the outdoors and interact with their neighbours. A separate jogging and bicycle track would make this area more effective and safer.

In many instances, green areas are unfriendly spaces, either tucked away in a small little plot, or without benches or a shaded area to unwind in - quite obviously an afterthought! This is something that can even be achieved in condominium developments. Perhaps thinking about inventive ways of using space is how developers can contribute to bringing back the sense of community we all enjoyed years ago.

At the same time, when we talk about innovation, we must not overlook practicality. The most innovative homes are those that meet the needs of their occupants at every turn. As developers, we would do well to ensure that serious thought goes into this aspect of building. For example, in Malaysia, a wet kitchen is an essential part of every home. Many people often spend extra money renovating their brand new homes for the use of a wet kitchen. How much more efficient it would be if this had already been thought of from the start.

While we already have properties in Malaysia that meet world standards of innovation, quality and appeal, these are often restricted to high end properties in prime city centre locations. Perhaps our next challenge is to see that these high standards trickle down to the rest of the market.

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