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Preparing for expansion

Despite a slowdown in transactions, some property consultants are planning to double their number of associates and expand to new markets

Designer homes in Sembawang

A pair of semi-detached houses and three terraced houses in the vicinity of Sembawang Park are on the market. Will buyers be drawn to the luxury of space and proximity to nature in the northern reaches of Singapore?

Designer homes in Sembawang

A pair of semi-detached houses and three terraced houses in the vicinity of Sembawang Park will be launched for sale. Will the luxury of space and proximity to greenery in the northern reaches of Singapore draw buyers?

BY CECILIA CHOW |

Five years ago, on Feb 29, Franklin Po, chairman of Franklin Po Architect, decided to attend a URA public auction in which 11 sites for landed property development in Sembawang were put for sale. Po and his brother were there for two of the sites. When they arrived, a packed room, which was mainly filled with developers and contractors, Po happened to find a friend who was also there to bid for some lots of land. As they were one of the few individuals who were not developers in the room, they decided to join forces and bid for the two sites they wanted under Truss Realty, rather than bid against each other, says Po.

The firm was successful in winning the 99-year leasehold land parcels that total 8,435 sq ft site for the development of a pair of semi-detached houses at the end of Wak Hassan Drive and a 9,574 sq ft plot for the development of four terraced houses on Kerong Walk.

The land parcel for the pair of semi-detached houses on Wak Hassan Drive is a prime choice site, says Po, as it has direct view of the 15-acre Sembawang Park just across the road. The Kerong Walk parcel was equally attractive as it overlooks a secondary forest.

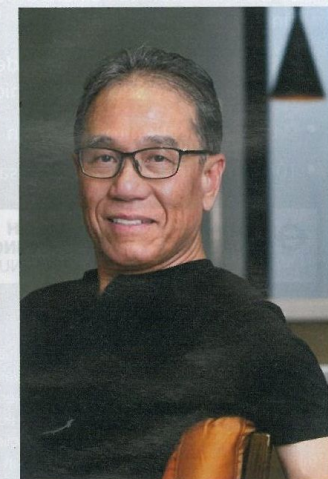
A registered architect in California, Singapore for the last 39 years, Po decided to work hand in hand with Zarch Collaborative on the design of the houses in Sembawang. In February this year, five years after winning the sites, the pair of semi-detached houses on Wak Hassan Drive and the four terraced houses on Kerong Walk obtained their temporary occupation permit.

"This is our first foray into property development," says Po. "We put our heart and soul into it, so it's very personal."

Maximising views and space

Po decided to configure the layout of the house to maximise the views and indoor spaces. For instance, the 3½-storey semi-detached house at 53 Wak Hassan Drive is designed to take full advantage of the view of Sembawang Park. The side of the house facing the park has many windows so that the master suite on the second level and bedrooms on the third level can have a view of the park. One of the bedrooms on the second level also has an adjoining balcony. On the first level, full-height glass sliding doors lead out to a patio and garden, where homeowners have the option of putting in a swimming pool, says Po.

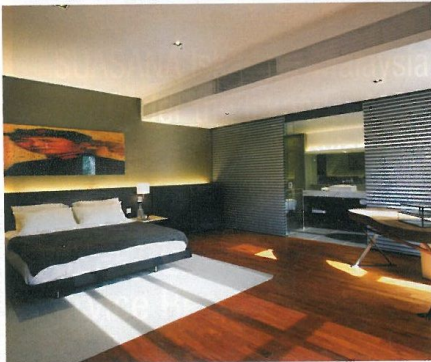
The attic level of the semi-detached house at 53 Wak Hassan Drive is designed as a bedroom, but can also be used as a room, study or home entertainment room. A central feature of the attic is the skylight.



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The newly completed 3½-storey semi-detached house at 53 Wak Hassan Drive



The 'grand master suite' on the second level features a spacious master bedroom with a walk-in wardrobe and bathroom



The interior of the corner terraced house at 2 Kerong Walk with the open-concept kitchen on the left and the living room that overlooks the garden on the right



The exterior of the four terraced houses on Kerong Walk. The privacy wooden shutters have been designed as part of the façade.



The view of the secondary forest from the higher floors of the terraced houses on Kerong Walk

which one can look across the the Straits of Johor to Johor Baru.

Meanwhile, the adjoining semi-detached house at 51 Wak Hassan Drive has a different configuration. The central feature of the house is the air well, which is designed like an indoor garden and reminiscent of the air wells in conservation shophouses, says Po. The other highlight of the house is the triple-volume ceiling height of the stairwell. The timber staircase with steel cables running along the sides has also become a design feature of the house, he points out.

Even the four terraced houses on Kerong Walk have slightly different layouts. Unlike the semi-detached houses on Wak Hassan Drive, the terraced houses have four levels, including a basement.

The two corner terraced houses are oriented such that the main entrance is from the side of the house and one enters at the middle with the open-concept kitchen at the front and the

living room at the rear overlooking a walled garden, with the forest beyond. "By moving the entrance to the side, you now have a nice view of the garden from your living room, unlike most typical terraced houses, where you're looking out at the car porch when you're sitting in the living room," he adds.

The two intermediate terraced houses are mirror images of each other. Unlike the corner terraced houses, the entrance to the intermediate terraced houses is from the front of the house. However, they feature a central air well. The living room also has views of the garden. One of the intermediate terraced houses has already been sold and is currently occupied.

The basement level of the terraced houses is spacious and can be used as a family room, an art studio or a library, says Po. It also contains a powder room, utility room and maid's room with attached bathroom.

While the configuration of each house is different, they all contain four bedrooms, including a "grand master suite" that takes up the entire second level. The master suite has a spacious master bedroom, a walk-in wardrobe with ample storage space and a large bathroom. A lift large enough to fit a wheelchair is installed in every house. All the doorways of the houses were also designed to be wheelchair-accessible. "We should be cognisant of the fact that we have an ageing population," says Po. "So, we have to design our houses accordingly."

The houses developed by Truss Realty are "aspirational homes", says Po. Even though they were developed to be sold, "we designed the houses the way we would have wanted to live in them", he adds.

The emphasis was therefore on providing space, comfort and functionality. The design was kept simple, with materials chosen to make the house easy to maintain, says Po. For privacy, timber shutters have been incorporated into the façade of the houses.

Truss Realty has decided to put all the houses in its portfolio for sale by tender, with

CBRE as the marketing agent. The portfolio of five houses (the pair of semi-detached houses and three remaining terraced houses) will be launched for sale with a guide price of \$15 million, or \$943 psf.

The developer has decided to offer the houses for bulk sale as there have been expressions of interest from buyers looking at purchasing adjoining units for their extended families, says Galven Tan, associate director of investment properties at CBRE, the marketing agent for the properties.

'Competitively priced'

Truss Realty is also open to selling the individual units to interested buyers. The terraced houses on Kerong Walk have land areas ranging from 2,187 to 2,946 sq ft and built-up areas of 5,327 to 6,605 sq ft. The guide price ranges from \$2.4 million to \$2.8 million, or \$950 to \$1,100 psf.

The semi-detached house at 53 Wak Hassan Drive sits on a 4,660 sq ft site and has a built-up area of 7,442 sq ft. It has an indicative price of \$3.96 million (\$850 psf). Meanwhile, the semi-detached house on 51 Wak Hassan Drive sits on a smaller site of 3,774 sq ft, but has a larger built-up area of 7,797 sq ft. The house has a price tag of just under \$3.4 million (\$900 psf).

"The asking prices for the houses are very competitive," says CBRE's Tan. Nearby, at Penaga Place, a terraced house completed last year was sold for \$3 million, while another that was completed four years ago changed hands for \$2.15 million (\$1,155 psf), according to caveats lodged with URA Realis in June and July.

On the market is a row of eight detached houses named Bungalows by the Sea by listed property developer Fragrance Group, which is controlled by billionaire James Koh. Fragrance was the biggest player in Sembawang, having

snapped up many of the land parcels at URA's land auctions. "Fragrance [Group] was very aggressive," recounts Po. "We had to bid against them for the [Wak Hassan] site."

The detached houses that make up Bungalows by the Sea were completed last year and have land areas ranging from 4,532 to 5,468 sq ft. The houses are large, with total floor areas ranging from 7,416 to 9,752 sq ft. And they come with six bedrooms and luxury fittings. Last year, when Bungalows by the Sea first previewed, the houses had indicative price tags in the range of \$7.95 million to \$9.77 million.

In the light of the recent property cooling measures, the developer has adjusted the asking prices for Bungalows by the Sea, according to Jimmy Ng, head of strategic development at Real-Star Premier, who is marketing the project. When the project was relaunched a few months ago, two of the eight detached houses were sold for \$7.18 million (\$1,324 psf) and \$6.4 million (\$1,412 psf) respectively, according to caveats lodged with URA Realis in May and June.

The remaining detached houses have asking prices ranging from \$6.52 million to \$7.92 million before a 4% discount, says Ng.

The Sembawang area has become a popular choice among families in recent years, says CBRE's Tan. He attributes it to the tranquillity of the area and its proximity to Sembawang Park and the sea.

According to Tan, the houses developed by Truss Realty and designed by Po stand out in the neighbourhood as they are not "the typical cookie-cutter developments". "They are designed to appeal to, and meet the needs of, a modern family," he adds. The sale by tender for the semi-detached houses on Wak Hassan Drive and terraced houses on Kerong Walk closes on Oct 31.



Tan: The houses stand out as their designs are based on the functional needs of a modern family



The triple-volume stairwell at the semi-detached house at 51 Wak Hassan Drive