

More furniture polish

CALLS FOR A GREATER SENSE OF
DESIGN 'ADVENTURE'

For 17 years the Malaysian International Furniture Fair (MIFF) in Kuala Lumpur has been an important stage for many of the ASEAN region's manufacturers to display their international capabilities. But in 2011 the stars were hard to find – as **Tony Neilson** reports.

Last year was the Malaysian Government's proclaimed 'Year of Innovation', but it seems the message didn't get through to many of the country's furniture producers.

MIFF's usually upbeat owner Dato Tan Chin Huat was among those dissatisfied with the offering in the first week of March from an industry generating around US\$2.5 billion a year in export sales.

"I am not really that happy with the show. If you look carefully there are some very good pieces of furniture, but I am sorry to say there is still a problem with final workmanship, and too many companies do not know how to promote," he told *In-Wood*. "Perhaps they don't realise what they have!"

With the nearby international fair in Singapore opening a few days later (see separate report) with a clearly superior presentation and a 24% increase in exhibitor numbers, Tan is only too well aware that MIFF must do better.

His two biggest challenges are the Malaysian industry's entrenched reluctance to use professional designers and a widespread lack of enthusiasm to spend money on presentation. "We have to 'polish ourselves' and come out with good products. We must let people know we are innovative and creative." And putting his money where his mouth is, for the

past two years Tan has stumped up US\$160,000 in sponsorship for the Ideation Awards – an investment in the future of design, open to Malaysian architectural, interior and industrial design students under 25.

"Some manufacturers are now considering producing a few of the competition creations for next season, and the awards have also attracted the Government's attention. But there is a long way to go," he says with resignation.

On that point there is absolute agreement from the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation CEO, Datuk Dr Noharuddin Nordin, who told a large assembly of manufacturers at MIFF it was time the industry created a more ambitious vision for itself.

"We have to start building on the long years of experience in the global market to develop a stronger and more sustainable image of Malaysian furniture.

"We should aim for a state where the international market is willing to pay a premium for our products. Those who have the wherewithal should start investing in building and marketing their own designs and brands.

"Marketing one's own brand is expensive, takes a long time and success is uncertain. But, like everything else, it has to start with a vision." (Also good advice for many in the Australian and New Zealand wood industry, we think.)



“With all difficulty, there is also a risk. And every time you succeed in your risk-taking, you grow. Malaysians need to be more adventurous with their designs.”

– **Anne Lyhne**



Showing the benefits of professional design, the SJI bedroom set in pecan (hickory) veneer by Anne Lyhne

Design excellence

Flying the flag of design excellence at MIFF this year was the SJI Group with a ‘vintage/modern’ collection called ‘Forest’ – featuring a dining and bedroom collection of pecan (hickory)-veneered rubberwood, and lounge and bedroom settings emphasising natural fabrics retrieved from the ‘scrap heap’.

Creator of the products and the exhibition booth itself was Danish interior designer Anne Lyhne who moved

to Malaysia five years ago – bringing with her seven years’ experience at Ikano (owned by IKEA’s Kamprad family), and a strong sense of the sustainable.

“Most of what I do is using things I find – from furniture I have remodelled, or bits of cut off wood or fabric. A lot of the fabrics I use for bedspreads and so on are made from material you cannot get any more.

“I go to factories and find whatever they have thrown in the corner. This is not just a trend – I simply don’t ▶





“I am tickled to death with the traffic and the business written. It has been a pleasant surprise – people actually come in and give you [purchase orders] and down payments.” – **Bob Hudgins**



The tradition at MIFF is to do deals on the spot

like waste. What is happening now [global waste] makes me sick to my stomach. We throw out so much and I ask our [SJI] factory to keep everything, because eventually I will make something out of it.

“I get real pleasure from knowing I have made something without exploiting and without waste.”

Lyhne likes the freedom [from stifling regulations in Europe] that Malaysia offers. “In a design sense, this is a pioneer country for me.” But she shares the concern of others about a general lack of understanding of the importance of original design in the wider industry.

“Very often, the first attitude is ‘I cannot do it’. They either don’t want to, or they can’t; I am not sure. With all difficulty, there is also a risk. And every time you succeed in your risk-taking, you grow. Malaysians need to be more adventurous with their designs.

“When I walk around this show, there is no life. From one set of furniture to another it is the same. And next year you will see copies of something else. This is a weakness – they don’t look at themselves and ask ‘what do I want to do?’ They look at what others do and then they mirror that.”

Lyhne has repositioned SJI with a number of distinctive ‘vintage modern’ furniture and interior design outlets around Malaysia. It also exports to North America, the Middle East and Japan.

More competitive

Within a few paces of the SJI booth was one of Malaysia’s most respected traditional manufacturers, Hume Furniture Industries – and it, too, is making changes to be more competitive.

American Bob Hudgins is the new business development director, with an eye firmly on growing Hume’s US sales. “It has not been a focus before, but we need new business like everybody else, and we are turning north to get that.”



Dato Tan Chin Huat – wants more ‘polish’ and innovation



The ‘hibiscus’ is represented by modular pentagonal components in this Ideation-winning coffee table design by 19-year-old Angie Ng Yong Hui

The other eye is on Asia and he introduced five new collections at MIFF. “They are truly American product in terms of design, but the reception here has been great. The look is cleaner than European and a little bigger perhaps. And it shows that proven designs can sell around the world.”

The company has also broken away from the overwhelmingly dark look that pervaded the show. “We have introduced a lot of lighter timbers like walnut, hickory and cherry with a mocha finish.

This was Hudgins’ first MIFF and he was delighted with the response. “It has been a real eye-opener ... We have averaged 80 customers a day from all over Europe, Africa, India, Asia and Australia, and just about everywhere else.

“I am tickled to death with the traffic and the business written. It has been a pleasant surprise – people actually come in and give you [purchase orders] and down payments. They want to do the business on the spot.

“The experience has given me a fresh perspective. Like the Indian customer with 18 stores and learning what sells there and what doesn’t. So I am designing product specifically for that market now.”

Singapore-based market watcher and regular *In-Wood* correspondent Michael Buckley thought the show emphasised the extent to which Malaysia is importing raw materials to supplement rubberwood.

“It also showed that plantation species can be more easily exploited as the taste for ever darker coloured furniture, at least in Malaysia’s key markets, becomes more popular. MDF and HDF also continue to play a greater role as more veneered and foil-faced products emerge, and as painted furniture comes back into fashion.”

Even in a tough year, provisional figures show MIFF generated US\$80 million in sales and attracted 20,000-plus visitors from 140 countries, including 6500 foreign and 8700 local buyers. ■



The leading name in wood protection in New Zealand and Australia.

- CCA ·LOSP ·Boron
- Anti-sapstains ·Timber care
- Preservation plant engineering & consultancy

For more information about the full range of market-leading **Tanalised®** products, please go to www.tanalised.com or contact **Arch Wood Protection (09) 276 3646**

