

residential





# raw appeal

This deliberately-left-unfinished residence in Kuala Lumpur is a testament to geometric elegance.

Text by Sasha Gonzales  
Photography by Lawrence Choo



*(Facing page)* Driving uphill towards Project Conservatory gradually reveals its massive brick façade walls.  
*(Above)* Grey-tinted glass sliding doors help keep the interior of the house cool.

The initial brief for this residence in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was specific: bare concrete and unplastered walls, using the original raw materials; open spaces for private functions, especially on the lower ground floor and rooftop; and a conservatory for gardening and dining. The clients, a lawyer couple, also wanted to incorporate private workspaces, or lawyers' chambers, into the design.

That was in October 2018, and over the next five years, the project underwent a transformation, going from a mere residential concept to an empty architectural slate, with spaces that remain deliberately undone to allow for flexibility and change as life unfolds within its walls.

## unrefined beauty

"The unfinished interior of the building adds a unique and captivating dimension to its overall appeal," says architect Lim Kee Yen, who headed the project. Lim is the founder of Kee Yen Architect, based in Shah Alam.

"By intentionally leaving certain interior spaces this way, the building showcases the raw beauty of its structural elements and materials. The exposed brickwork and unadorned concrete surfaces tell a story of authenticity and craftsmanship, providing a sense of connection to the building's construction process," he explains.

"Moreover, the interior invites viewers to appreciate the building's inner workings and the natural ageing process of its materials, making it a living canvas that evolves over time. This dynamic interplay between the raw and the refined fosters a unique and enduring charm that sets the building apart and invites admiration from those who experience it."

Lim points out that the architectural layout was driven by contextual responses, focusing not only on sun orientation, city views and greenery, but also on framed views and a series of spatial experiences. For example, the slightly sloping access road provides the first glimpse of the building, gradually revealing the gigantic brick façade walls as one approaches the house.

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Additionally, a series of different volumetric spaces was strategically inserted into the design to enhance both external and internal views.

### conservatory concept in the tropics

As the overall design of the building was inspired by a conservatory, the structure was named Project Conservatory.

A conservatory is a building or room with glass or other transparent, glazed roofing or walls. It is often used as a greenhouse or a sun lounge. It's typically attached to the side or end of a house.

Lim looked at how he could make the conservatory concept work in a tropical setting. He decided to integrate the glazed mass (the conservatory) into the spatial planning rather than simply adding it as an attachment.

This design process revealed large, empty, hall-like spaces on the lower ground floor that had initially been planned for a car garage and function hall. It also gave shape to the building itself, with a tropical roof pitch degree and an open roof space under the same roof form, achieved through a series of metal hollow frames.

"'Tropical roof pitch degree' refers to the shape of the roof, which features a degree of fall similar to the typical

tropical pitch roof," Lim says. "This is where we've created a conservatory without glazing, but instead, used a series of metal hollow frames to replicate the typical tropical pitch roof. This form also extends from the main brickwalls' façade concrete roof. We reimagined the conservatory in the tropics on the rooftop."

Lim employed various methods to keep the building cool and well-ventilated, the first of which was to emphasise the significance of voids. These were strategically inserted and interwoven within the building, complementing the use of tangible materials. The lower ground floor features double-volume voids interconnected with a three-storey-high void at the entrance foyer level. These are connected to large, open horizontal floor plates to facilitate air ventilation.

Tangible materials, such as double-layered bricks in the fair-faced brick construction and grey-tinted glass, also help maintain a cooler temperature within the house. And staircases were designed to be stacked and open to the external environment.

### project name

Project Conservatory

### location

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

### gross floor area

2,300 sqm

### year of completion

2023

### architect firm

Kee Yen Architect, Malaysia

### lead architect

Lim Kee Yen

### developer

Fantastic Champion Sdn Bhd and Chee Hoe & Associates

### c&s consultant

Perunding CSS

### m&e consultant

3YS Consulting Sdn Bhd

### main contractor

TSH Construction Sdn Bhd

*(Below) Embracing the raw beauty of the building's structural elements and materials.*

*(Facing page) Voids were strategically inserted and interwoven within the building.*



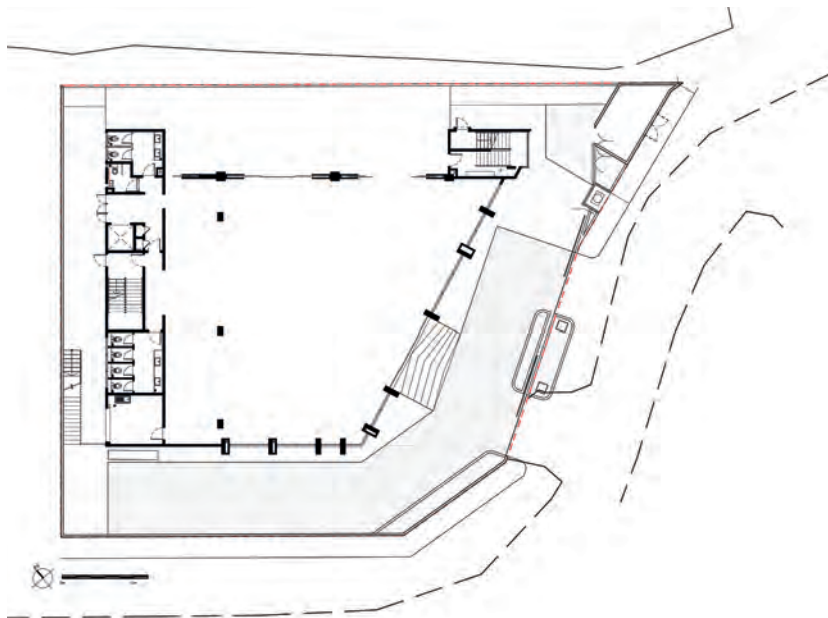
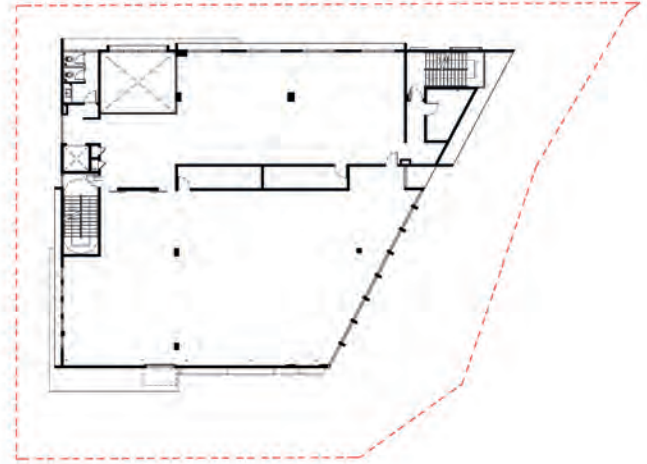
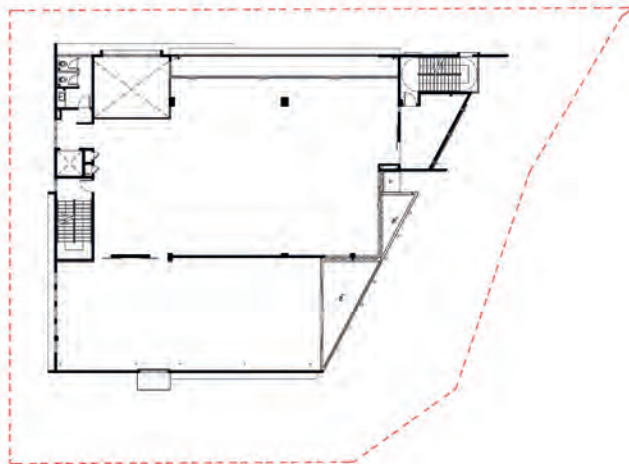
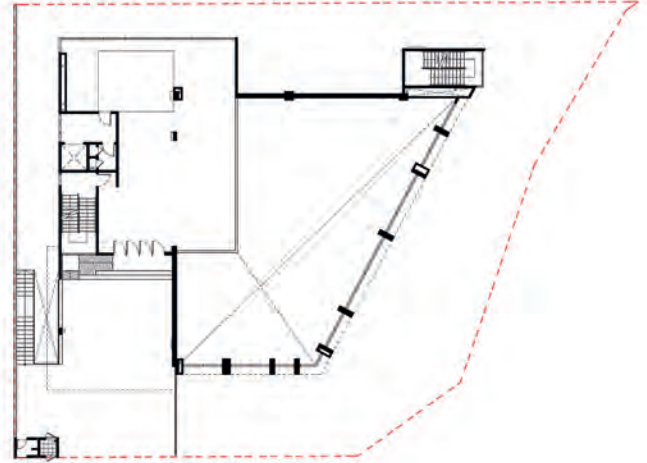
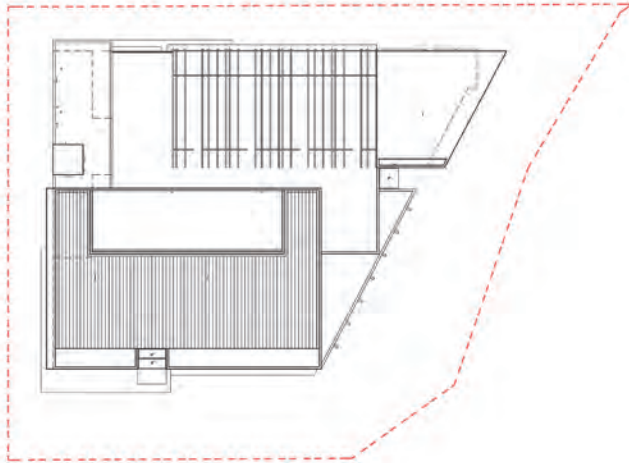






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## floor plan





**lim kee yen**  
founder of Kee Yen  
Architect

### **rugged authenticity**

Materials used in the design and construction process were selected for specific reasons. For example, the fair-faced brick walls provide a timeless and robust backdrop. The frontage wall, in particular, was designed with embossed patterns and holes for light and ventilation. Each tiny hole also frames what is happening on the street.

The bare-concrete surfaces offer an industrial yet elegant aesthetic, symbolising raw authenticity, Lim adds. And black metal screens not only add a touch of modernity but also enhance privacy and control light penetration. Grey-coloured glass complements the overall design, adding a hint of sophistication and allowing controlled natural light to infuse the interior spaces. Finally, the polished concrete floors offer a seamless, durable and low-maintenance solution that ties the entire space together.

“Each choice for the materials was a thoughtful one, executed with precision to ensure that every detail contributed to the overall harmony of the space, creating an atmosphere that encourages one to slow down, especially when the building is empty,” Lim explains.

All the materials were locally crafted or sourced. The fair-faced bricks were made from locally sourced clay bricks selected for their burnt colours. The clay bricks were laid and left exposed without being covered with plaster or paint. Off-formed concrete and other concrete structures were cast to achieve the randomness of their resulting surfaces.

### **working with challenges**

Interestingly, the randomness resulting from the workmanship and craftsmanship of the builders as well as the concrete casting process turned out to be blessings in disguise.

“For starters, there were inconsistencies in the shades of the concrete and unexpected formwork failures, which led to an uneven surface on the concrete wall,” Lim shares. “The randomised order during the construction of the fair-faced brick wall became uncontrolled when the bricklayers unintentionally introduced another layer of randomness in their bricklaying.”

Ultimately, these “imperfections” in the original materials, unintentional mistakes, and the natural appearance of rawness, all became integral to the overall aesthetic of the building.

Construction on Project Conservatory ended this September. Lim says that the “emptiness” in the building’s architecture is one of its most unique features. “Our design extends an invitation to appreciate not just the physical materials but also the ethereal essence of empty architecture,” he adds. “The spaces are designed to transcend the constraints of time and evoke a sense of timelessness, where architecture becomes a vessel for the soul’s reflection and exploration.”

*Lim reimagined the conservatory in the tropics on the rooftop*

