

Ireka scores with Westin KL

By JOHNNI WONG
johnni@thestar.com.my

"TRIAL" and "tribulation" are two words that Ireka Corp Bhd executive director Lai Voon Hon, 41, is fond of repeating when talking about his pet project, The Westin Kuala Lumpur, owned by Ireka.

The recent Fiabci Prix d'Excellence 2006 award bestowed upon The Westin Kuala Lumpur as the world's best hotel development capped a triumphant moment greatly savoured by his father, Lai Siew Wah, 66, who is Ireka's group managing director.

In fact, Voon Hon's mother and his sister Monica, were also at the awards ceremony in Bangkok. And so were other board members and key staff who had waited for that moment after a long and rocky road in turning the hotel into a reality.

And now beyond their wildest dreams, the hotel is recognised as world-class, beating out the likes of Hilton Buenos Aires and Changi Village Hotel.

Any seasoned entrepreneur will no doubt empathise with the Lai family in their agonising years when the chips were down. They not only had to suspend The Westin's construction but to convince bankers to support the project against conventional wisdom when work recommenced.

Says Voon Hon: "The Fiabci award is something which we are very proud of, in terms of personal satisfaction and for the company and the nation - to be recognised as one of the best developments in the international arena."

The hotel had earlier won in leisure and hotel category in the Fiabci Malaysian Property Award 2005 and was selected to represent the country in the Fiabci

international awards.

"It was judged on many different criteria in terms of innovativeness, social contribution, in relation to the environment, financial performance and feedback from the public."

"What stood out at the Malaysian Property Award - and which impressed the Fiabci international panel of judges - was that the construction site was only 1.2-acre, or only 52,000 sq ft. From that, we were able to develop a very high stan-

"What we did not want to do was to go for a grand hall or atrium, typical of most traditional five-star hotels. We opted for more intimate, boutique-like spaces which yet exude the five-star experience."

In terms of design, The Westin KL was a collaboration between Voon Hon and Felix Y.W. Chan, associate director of Wong & Ouyang Ltd architectural and engineering firm, based in Hong Kong.

As an architect, Voon Hon had worked in London and Hong Kong, and was involved in several major hotel property developments. Later, he returned to Kuala Lumpur and joined a local architectural firm in 1991. Subsequently, when Ireka's hotel project was mooted, he joined his father.

Ireka is basically a construction and property development company with a 39-year track record. It began operations as Syarikat Lai Siew Wah, a sole proprietorship established by Siew Wah in 1967 and was involved in general earth-moving works.

It was renamed Ireka Construction Bhd and subsequently assumed its present name in 2000. It was listed on the Bursa Malaysia (then known as the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange) main board two years later. Both Siew Wah and Voon Hon are major shareholders of Ireka through Ideal Land Holdings Sdn Bhd.

When construction of the hotel - undertaken by a subsidiary - began at the end of 1995, geotechnical problems were encountered. This was despite the fact that extensive groundwork survey was undertaken. To overcome the problems of limestone formations and groundwater table, a "unique way of



LAYERING OF SPACE: Although built on only 1.2 acres, The Westin KL feels quite spacious

dard hotel with all the five-star facilities expected in this region.

"This was achieved through a creative layout plan which uses the layering of space. The use of the volume height from floor to floor kind of allowed various experiences within the space."

THE Westin Kuala Lumpur has been deemed the world's best hotel by a select group of international real estate consultants due to three factors.

According to Fiabci Asia Pacific regional secretariat secretary-general Kumar Tharmalingam (pic) - who was on the international judging panel that comprised 25 Fiabci country presidents - The Westin was a popular choice. It was consistently among the top three picked by the different judges.

"As a city hotel, The Westin has space though the total land area spans only 1.2 acres," explains Kumar, who is the immediate past

Winning factors

president of Fiabci-Malaysia.

There were five contenders for the Fiabci Prix D'Excellence 2006 Award for best hotel development. Three were selected as finalists. The other two were the Hilton Buenos Aires in Argentina and the Changi Village Hotel in Singapore.

The Westin KL is a 452-room five-star hotel that includes executive residences and suites. The development has six food and beverage outlets, namely, EEST, Splash, Treats, Prego, Qba and The Living Room.

Says Kumar: "For example, the Hilton Buenos Aires, being in South America, has plenty of space to build - no big deal. Sure, it is a very nice hotel but not a challenge - there's no X-factor there."

"As for The Westin's hotel rooms



ALL IN THE FAMILY: Lai Siew Wah (second left) and (from left) his wife, Voon Hon and Monica savouring their moment of triumph at the Fiabci Prix d'Excellence 2006 award ceremony in Bangkok

construction" was decided upon.

Says Voon Hon: "Because of that, we reduced the number of columns in order to reduce piling work. An outrigger construction system was adopted with the load concentrated on the core and a couple of large columns."

"With this system, the foundation had to be quite deep and big. So, we opted for hand-dug caisson, which ended up to be the deepest of its size ever done in Malaysia. It took a long time for the foundation work, so we advanced a top-down engineering technique. This meant that while we were piling and building the foundation, we also built upwards."

But by 1997 when the Asian financial crisis hit the region, Ireka was also caught.

"We had to make another difficult decision when the exchange rate to the US dollar kept going up. At one point it was RM4.80 to the dollar and was expected to hit RM5. It was a tough decision to stop construction work at the beginning of 1998. But we were fortunate to have the choice available to us, as the construction unit was our own."

"We were financially strong then as we still had not drawn on our syndicated loan and was still spending our company's internal funds."

Construction was halted and the project was "mothballed" as Ireka switched to maintenance mode. Coincidentally, during that stage, the Westin hotel group was revamping the brand to reflect a "modern contemporary" image. So, Voon Hon and his team "revisited" the design plans.

The project was resumed in 2001 and the Ireka bosses were looking at opening the hotel at the end of 2003. But during the intermediate period, the country was faced with a labour shortage between 2002 and 2003. This was compounded with a shortage of construction materials.

The hotel opening was yet again delayed and postponed either to the end of 2003 or early 2004.

"Then SARS hit Asia. It was another tough decision whether to open at the beginning of 2004 or defer. We had already engaged the pre-opening team including the general manager and sales executives at the end of 2003."

"The SARS problem was more serious than we thought and it was decided to wait until September 2004."

"This rationale was also part of the submission to the Fiabci competition. In hindsight, some of the decisions proved to be correct ones," says Voon Hon.

gives access to professional real estate associations worldwide and commercial information.

The Fiabci Prix d'Excellence recognises the project that best embodies excellence in all the real estate segments involved in its creation. It rewards overall merit and not just aesthetics, functionality or size. The winner has the right to use the award logo.

Winners also gain access to international platforms for their projects and companies throughout the extensive Fiabci network of more than 50 member countries and over 110 professional organisations worldwide.

Fiabci recently set up the Asia Pacific regional secretariat in Kuala Lumpur headed by Fiabci past president Datuk Alan Tong Kok Mau. Members from the region include South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam and Nepal.

