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Jose House by Fabian Tan Architect



Workers Accommodation in Penang

by Ar Au Tai Yeow



Penang is located on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia, with an island by the Straits of Malacca and the larger mainland on the peninsula. The key economic industries of the state are international tourism and electronic manufacturing. Since the 1970s, over 300 multinational corporations had established their offices and production facilities in the Free Industrial Zones within the state, leading Penang to be known as the “Silicon Valley of the East”.

A large labour force is often required to sustain and drive operations in the labour-intensive manufacturing sector. In Penang, the majority of workers employed in the electronics factories are from foreign countries. Given the scarcity of purpose-built workers accommodation in Penang, multiple issues arising from this situation have become more pronounced in recent years. For example, social conflicts can occur due to different cultural dynamics, habits and work schedules, accentuated by less than ideal and claustrophobic conditions when workers are housed in unsuitable apartments or projects. There is also the question of perception, when workers are housed in low-cost flats meant for low-income earners, resulting in resentment amongst Malaysian low-income earners and their families who need homes.

Westlite Dormitory is an independent dormitory owner-operator with vast experience in managing workers housing in Johor and Singapore. Four years ago, it initiated the Westlite Bukit Tambun

project in Penang. At that time, no framework for regulating workers accommodation existed. Guidelines on the requirements such as provision of open spaces, basic amenities and so forth had not yet been regulated. Westlite thus adopted the requirements from the Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition (EICC), now known as the Responsible Business Alliance (RBA) – a group of electronics, retail, auto and toy companies committed to supporting the rights and wellbeing of workers and communities worldwide. Subsequently, the Penang state government instituted guidelines for workers accommodation. Nonetheless, there were still other issues to overcome during the process of obtaining planning and building approval for the project. Westlite had to assure the local residents that there would not be issues with having workers of different nationalities residing in their neighbourhoods, as well as to mitigate concerns of traffic congestions. It took almost two years before works on site could begin.

The project site is a 4.42 acres land in Bukit Tambun, next to the Bukit Minyak Industrial Zone. Formerly an oil palm plantation, its strategic location makes this housing complex ideal for companies seeking to provide accommodation for their workers. The location helps to reduce the transportation time to work, while also reducing the likelihood of the foreign workers occupying the existing limited housing stock nearby and creating social issues in the area. The property itself is dissected by high-tension cables and as such, a large part of it was rendered unbuildable. However, this became a blessing in disguise as it meant that the project had a generous amount of open spaces in addition to meeting other authority requirements on rainwater detention. As one part of the site boundary faces the highway, this naturally became the entry point to the housing complex. A single-storey amenities block which facilitates the security of the residents is positioned there. Other facilities there include shops, food stalls, ATM machines, clinic and management office. A platform for the workers to wait for their transportation to and from work is also located within this amenities block.

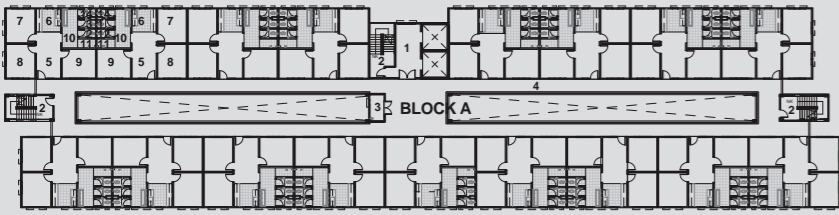
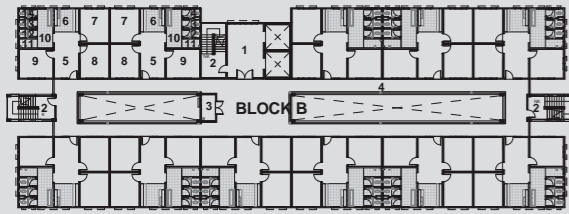
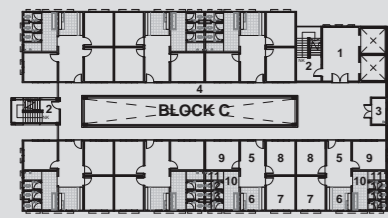
The three blocks of housing are positioned at one end of the site. The ground floor of the housing blocks also serves as an open space for residents to mingle and gather after they return from work and during their leisure time. There are also dedicated spaces like study rooms, a multipurpose hall and a gymnasium located within the housing blocks.

In order to provide a more conducive living environment for all, the residents must adhere to a set of ‘House Rules’. A system comprising of community policing rounds within and outside the complex will be put in place, with the hope that this will create a sense of ownership among the residents towards the place in which they live. CCTVs are placed along the complex boundary and in the amenities block as a security measure, as well as to ensure that only registered residents have access to the complex.

This project presented numerous challenges and constraints; one major architecture challenge was the cost-conscious budget, utilitarian design and maintenance friendly material finishes. Perhaps the significance of this project lies more in the long and tedious process to meet requirements and obtain approvals from the authorities, which also included addressing the concerns and sometimes xenophobic anxieties of the local residents, complying with social requirements and finally to educating the builder to take ownership of the end product by providing better workmanship for the silent transient occupiers.

Workers in the manufacturing industry are often invisible to society even though the work they do contributes greatly to Penang’s economic development; especially those who made sacrifices by leaving their family and home country in search of work. The demography of the workers has changed since the inception of Penang as an electronic hub for the world as the locals (Penangites and Malaysians) gradually move up the workforce, leaving the more mundane and repetitive assembly-line tasks to the foreign workers. Therefore, it is only right that their stay in Penang be made conducive to ensure that their productivity as well as the state’s development can both continue to prosper. AM





- 1 Lobby
 - 2 Staircase
 - 3 Refuse room
 - 4 Corridor
- Quarter's unit**
- 5 Living & dining
 - 6 Kitchen
 - 7 Bedroom 1
 - 8 Bedroom 2
 - 9 Bedroom 3
 - 10 Wash area 1
 - 11 Wash area 2
 - 12 Bathroom 1
 - 13 Bathroom 2
 - 14 Bathroom 3

Typical floor 0m 10m 20m



Site plan 0m 10m 20m

- Site compound**
- i Refuse chamber
 - ii Recycle bin chamber
 - iii Sewage treatment plant
 - iv Retention pond
 - v TNB transmission power

- Block amenity**
- 1 Turnstile entrance
 - 2 Management office
 - 3 Canteen
 - 4 Mini market
 - 5 Toilet (female)
 - 6 Toilet (male)
 - 7 Toilet (OKU)
 - 8 Prayer room (male)
 - 9 Prayer room (female)
 - 10 Clinic
 - 11 Sickbay
 - 12 Quarantine room

- Block A**
- 1 Lobby
 - 2 Staircase
 - 3 Refuse room
 - 4 Domestic pump room
 - 5 TNB substation
 - 6 Switch room
 - 7 Meter room
 - 8 Genset room
 - 9 Quarter's unit

- Block B**
- 1 Lobby
 - 2 Staircase
 - 3 Refuse room
 - 4 Domestic pump room
 - 5 Sprinkler pump room
 - 6 Gym room
 - 7 Shop
 - 8 Game room
 - 9 Study room
 - 10 Multipurpose room
 - 11 Toilet (male)
 - 12 Toilet (female)

- Block C**
- 1 Lobby
 - 2 Staircase
 - 3 Refuse room
 - 4 Domestic pump room
 - 5 Hose reel pump room
 - 6 Quarter's unit

Client
Westlite Dormitory (Bukit Minyak) Sdn Bhd

Architect
Architect T.Y. Au

C & S Engineers
CL Mo Jurutera Perunding

M & E Engineers
i Consultancy Sdn Bhd

Cost Consultants
Jurukur CEM Sdn Bhd

Landscape Designer
GCK Consultancy

Builder
CBE Tech Sdn Bhd

Photographer
Sai Bee Nyeen



Back view of the residential block

Ground floor - typical block



View of Amenity block



AR AU TAI YEOW graduated with honours from the Washington State University in 1990 and also spent a year at the DIS program at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, as a Rotary Undergraduate Scholar in 1989. In 1991, he obtained his Masters in Architecture and Urban Design at Washington University at St. Louis. In early 1998, he established Architect T.Y. Au, as a boutique practice dedicated to providing personal attention to detail and design. Based in Penang, Malaysia, it is a practice that has remained deliberately small in the belief that design quality and principles will be diluted the bigger a firm becomes.