



# THE MAKERS

KUALA LUMPUR-BASED STUDIO BIKIN EXTENDS ITS INTEREST IN CRAFT AND DETAIL FROM BUILT FORM TO FURNITURE.

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IMAGES \* COURTESY OF STUDIO BIKIN



Top: The studio's work on the Kurau House in Bangsar (originally built in the 1950s) has involved the reinstatement of the courtyard light well

Bottom: Studio Bikin's Directors Farah Azizan and Adela Askandar on site

WITH THE EXCEPTION of sole practitioners, it is uncommon to come across architectural design studios that are directed solely by women. Kuala Lumpur-based Studio Bikin is one of those rare cases. It is helmed by Directors Farah Azizan and Adela Askandar, both of whom studied architecture and worked in the UK before returning to Malaysia in the 2000s. Askandar returned with her Part III qualification from the Royal Institute of British Architects.

The pair established Studio Bikin primarily as a means of gaining control over their projects – a move that would allow them to push their key interest in craft and detail. They also wished to develop a better working relationship with their builders. “Our contractors are craftspeople – the ones responsible for translating our ideas and drawings into something tangible. A lot of things can get lost in that translation process,” says Askandar.

The studio takes its name from a Malay word that means ‘make’. “We believe architecture and design has a lot to do with the craft and skill of putting materials together,” says Azizan. Not surprisingly, the focus has been on smaller-scale work – residential and commercial – where the team can focus on the process of creating and making rather than getting lost in red tape and politics.

Askandar elaborates, “[For us,] it’s impossible to separate the conceptualising process from the material, because you lose the focus and detail. There’s a job scope for everyone in the design scene, from macro to micro. I just happen to like details and how things are screwed and hammered together, how the brass meets the steel, how the timber meets the laminate, how the rattan weave sits on the steel frame.”

The design and sale of furniture has been an equally consuming direction for Studio Bikin – encapsulating an extension of built form at the human scale. The store Kedai Bikin was opened in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur with the intention of cultivating an appreciation of local crafts and locally made and designed products – “[including

those by] the *pasar malam* [night market] chair makers, rattan uncles and *kayu ukir pakciks* [wood carving uncles] out there,” quips Azizan.

“We felt that in Malaysia there was not a properly curated platform to showcase the local design talent that is growing in the scene here. And we were tired of seeing Chinese-manufactured copies of Scandinavian modernist chairs flooding the Asian interior market,” says Azizan. The tagline for Kedai Bikin is: ‘Why fake it when we can make it.’ And keen to regain its focus on making rather than selling, the studio has begun partnering with dealers and consignees. Its next design collection will be rolled out soon.

Comments Askandar on the retail experience to date, “Malaysians have generally not warmed up to the idea of paying for a local designer chair yet, although they are willing to fork out double the price of our bespoke chairs for an imported chair or brand. However, we are sticking to our prices as firstly, we need to make it sustainable for us (as designers and makers); and secondly, we feel that you are really not paying that much for the amount of effort that goes into each product.”

That said, the pair are optimistic about growing the local design culture. “There is a decent pool of resources that are still untapped here in terms of traditional crafts, trades and design, which can be re-appropriated to our current mode of living,” suggests Azizan.

One feels compelled to ask about the pair’s experience of practicing as a female-directed studio. Does Studio Bikin face challenges that are not encountered by male practitioners? The response is heartening. “In our experience,” says Azizan, “women are treated with as much respect as our male counterparts here in Malaysia – if you can demonstrate that you know your stuff. It’s about communication and not gender at the end of the day.”

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Top left: The MS Grey chair, sold through Kedai Bikin, has a powder-coated steel frame and an upholstered or rattan seat and back

Top right: At the Tenggeri House (Bangsar, completed in 2010), a west-facing balcony extension was shaded by a trellis of black ropes and creepers

Bottom: In Ipoh, the studio completed a project to add a raised pool with ‘shoplets’ below to an existing development (2013)

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\* FARAH AZIZAN

