

## Building 'model' homes for real



Mr and Mrs Kow at a colonial-style bungalow they built for a 46-year-old oil trader and her family in Siglap last year. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

### Couple's love for architecture leads to business of building 'custom-made' houses

By JONATHAN KWOK

WHEN Mr Brian Kow was wooing his wife-to-be Judy, he used to build model houses to show her the sort of property they would live in once they were married.

Today, some 25 years after their wedding, Mr and Mrs Kow have moved some way on from what was then just a pipe dream.

They have not only got their dream home - a semi-detached house in the eastern part of Singapore which they renovated themselves to include an outdoor tea room and a jacuzzi - but have also taken their passion for stylish homes one step further. They now design and build high-end bespoke houses for others.

The 50-year-olds have managed to turn their lifelong love for architecture into a dynamic and promising business.

They specialise in landed houses for well-to-do clients who want a big say in the way their houses turn out. And while other companies offer either design or construction, their business, called Nic and Wes, combines both.

Started in 2002, the firm has grown into a flourishing niche enterprise, completing an average of

three to six projects worth between \$2 million and \$3.5 million every year.

The journey for the Kows began humbly enough though.

Mr Kow left a high-flying career as a money broker in 1995 to set up an employment agency, which he ran from a small office at Changi Road for three years to "gain experience in running a business".

Although money broking was exciting and challenging, he felt he wanted more control over his financial life, and did not want to leave it "in the hands of other people".

"Of course there is always fear of the uncertainty when you start out on your own, but the drive to be in control took precedence over fear," he said.

Then, in 1998, he teamed up with an acquaintance to start a building firm - designing and constructing landed houses. The small enterprise, which averaged one large project a year, was wound up in 2002. This gave Mr Kow the cue to rope in his wife and the duo struck out on their own.

The couple's new firm - Nic and Wes - was named after their two children, Nicole, 24, and Wesley, 21.

Said Mrs Kow: "We decided that by starting out for ourselves, we could have more flexibility in what we wanted to do, such as coming up with our own designs."

Her husband added: "Our former business taught us that with too many cooks, the dish may not come out that well."

With a capital of around \$100,000 - profits from the previous building firm together with Mr

Kow's savings from his money-broking days - the two began to drum up business.

In those days, Mr Kow and his son Wesley often had to brave the elements to distribute fliers to homes, and it was not until the start of 2003 that Nic and Wes really got off the ground.

This was substantially down to word of mouth. The firm constructed a house in Katong in its first year of business, and this led to an influx of enquiries.

"We gained our first spate of business through word of mouth, and ended up building five houses in the same area. We've had no more need to do traditional marketing campaigns since then," said Mr Kow.

Today, Nic and Wes receives eight enquiries every month - more than it can handle.

The company stands out in an industry that often fails to meet customer expectations.

### A GOOD EYE AND A NICE TOUCH

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Ms Samatha Scully, a satisfied customer

The Consumers Association of Singapore recorded more than 800 complaints against builders and contractors between January and November last year.

In contrast, Nic and Wes says that it has received no complaints about workmanship or meeting deadlines, and only "minor comments" have been made by clients about teething problems when moving into their homes.

"We are always upfront with customers, and promise only what we can deliver. This helps us to build trust and rapport," said Mr Kow.

Mrs Kow added: "We employ in-house builders and plumbers to ensure that we can keep tight control over construction quality."

To keep the business ahead of the pack, and in keeping with the global shift towards environmentalism, the couple are looking to include "green" features in their designs.

These include solar panels and devices to harvest rainwater for non-potable uses such as the washing of cars and the flushing of toilets.

One of the firm's satisfied customer is Ms Saman-

tha Scully, a 46-year-old oil trader.

Nic and Wes built a two-storey classic black and white colonial-style bungalow in Siglap for Ms Scully and her family, completing it in August last year.

"The company is upfront and honest, and delivers what it promises," Ms Scully said. "They get the project done within the stipulated timeframe."

"Besides, this husband and wife team has a very good aesthetic touch, and a very good choice of finishing and detailing," added Ms Scully, who first heard of the company from her friends.

"They are good at optimising space and have good design ideas... Their design advice is an added service over other contractors, who just carry out instructions."

Nic and Wes has benefited from the generally upbeat Singapore housing market.

Industry watchers point out that the general rise in income has led to an increase in the number of specially built homes over the past decade or so.

Some observers put the increase in demand for such houses, which combine design concepts to meet homeowners' individual tastes, at 50 per cent

or more over the past 10 years.

Mr and Mrs Kow's good fortune in operating in a booming industry is not lost on them.

"Everyone who buys a house will either renovate or rebuild. The playground is very big in Singapore," said Mr Kow.

"Around 10 to 15 years ago, in every estate you'll see one or two houses being built. Today, you'll have around five or maybe more."

With the property market still growing and with many predicting that there will be further upside in the high-end housing market, further growth in the next two years looks likely for Nic and Wes.

The firm's immediate plans focus largely on being able to meet existing demand from customers.

Mrs Kow laments that they receive a lot of referrals from satisfied customers, many of which they are unable to take up due to lack of capacity.

Said Mr Kow: "For sustainability, we have no choice but to expand and to take more projects, as it's not good to keep on rejecting people."

In line with this goal, the couple expect to increase by 40 per cent their workforce of 30 builders, site engineers and labourers over the next two to three years.

With the larger workforce, the company expects to be in a position to undertake six to eight projects every year, and generate annual revenue of \$4 million to \$6 million.

Quite an improvement on constructing model houses.

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Nic and Wes even managed to fit a pool into the design of a house along Maria Avenue, despite its small plot of land. PHOTO: NIC AND WES BUILDERS