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## BRIAN KOW AND JUDE KOW

**Brian Kow and Jude Kow co-founded Nic & Wes Builders in 2002 with the aim of simplifying design and build construction services, including house reconstruction and renovation in Singapore. With a forte in landed residential properties, it is a one-stop-shop that provides services from conceptualisation to completion of lifestyle homes that encompass practicality, functionality and aesthetics.**

**Within the company, Brian's role is akin to being the captain of a ship as he steers the entire business organisation and direction while his wife Jude acts as an advisor with a flair for decorating.**

**How do you define a lifestyle home?**

**Brian:** It is working around the family's needs and tap into their aspirations to create an abode that would pull them home rather than going out. A home where people want to come back to and have their own space to enjoy for themselves.

**Jude:** To me, a lifestyle home has to have all the luxuries of a home, for example, a swimming pool, gym or movie room. When everything you need is under one roof, no matter how small the house is, you would not need to go out. If you like to entertain, we would design a semi-shaded roof terrace with inviting communal spaces, counter

tops, and even a bar or barbeque area to make it conducive to host guests. If you enjoy working from home, we can provide a nice office space within the house. It depends on what the clients want and, from there, we try to make a lifestyle home for them.

**What are the common types of lifestyle homes?**

**Brian:** There are so many kinds of lifestyle homes, so let me break it down into three general categories—heritage; tropical; and modern or ultra-modern. Heritage homes, which mostly comprise black-and-white colonial houses and Peranakan houses in Singapore, are very detailed with fanlights, decorative pillars

and intricate tiling among others, due to the fusion of East and West elements. These types of homes often come with pitched roofs. For tropical and resort-style homes, they embody a lot of earthy tones; stone feature walls; greenery; water features; and timber. These elements are usually further enhanced by warm and white light. Modern or ultra-modern homes generally have metal roofs, sometimes with very interesting curved profiles, lots of glass and laser-cut screens to create a luxe charm.

**Are sustainable materials or sourcing of local materials a priority in the decision-making process?**

**Brian:** There is a lot of awareness of



Colonial-styled bungalow with a water feature



Natural breeze flows in and out



Black and white exterior with a lush garden

sustainable materials but I do not think it has filtered down to private landed houses at the moment. I think you would see this happening more in the industrial, commercial or hospitality businesses where the authorities legislate that you should incorporate sustainable materials. The awareness is filtering down very slowly to the private residential sector. However, there is some level of curiosity among homeowners about sustainability. One that stands out would be solar power because the prices of photovoltaic materials have dropped quite a bit; at the same time, energy prices have just shot up. For example, out of 10 new houses that we build today, at least five or six of them would want to install some form of photovoltaic system.

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will take some time for the private residential or private landed property market in particular to adapt to these new material sources.

**How do you address common issues, such as rising materials cost, restrictive lot size and post-pandemic changes, when designing and building a lifestyle home?**

**Brian:** Rising cost is a universal issue, not just in Singapore. There is some amount of stabilisation as the curve has flattened out a little as we exit the pandemic. It is more predictable today, short of knowing what is going to come next. I do not see cost as a hindrance at this point of time because everything else such as the costs of property and petrol have also increased, so it is part and parcel of building cost too.



Solid minimalist pillars and railings

**Dealing with private landed houses, it is a more interesting challenge to create efficient space within a small piece of land, especially when you are dealing with an inter-terrace house.**

Dealing with private landed houses, it is a more interesting challenge to create efficient space within a small piece of land, especially when you are dealing with an inter-terrace house. We overcome it by having lightwells and air wells within the houses to add in light and ventilation while water features cool the house. We have broken the mould of what an entry-level terrace house can be with creative layout and effective space planning. When it comes to semi-detached and detached houses, you have more freedom to explore because they are usually bigger with more ventilation.

**Regarding the company's aim of simplifying the residential construction process from concept to completion, could you elaborate on how that is achieved?**

**Brian:** Ninety per cent of our projects are in the private landed arena—this is our specialty for the past 20 years. It is a constant push to simplify the process for homeowners. For a successful build, there are three key contributors—the architect,

engineer and builder—who must be very customer-centric. We call this the golden triangle. As builders, we have created a tried and tested platform of collaborating with the right people to get the job done.

Secondly, we have an in-house design team to support the whole project to hand-hold the client from beginning till the end. As we front the project, we serve as the point of contact to sew this up nicely.

Thirdly, our group of strategic partners also include suppliers and vendors of cabinetry, lighting, sanitaryware and more. That solves a lot of problems as we have the whole package for clients to choose from or if they would like to, as a yardstick to source for third-party vendors.

**What is your key philosophy when working with clients throughout the whole process?**

**Brian:** Overall, a home build journey can last between one to two years. For a successful build, it is about finding



A curve staircase with ebony granite tread of an ultra-modern home



Ultra-modern curved profile and deep hues



Abundance of high ceilings throughout



One of the unique features of the design-centric home



A double-storey inter-terrace transformed into a tropical villa



A sanctuary inspired by Balinese elegance



Roof terrace

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Brian Laptop's iPhone



Brian Laptop's iPhone

Screenshots from a Zoom interview with Construction-

common ground and everyone has to be on the same page, including the clients. We are holding each other's hands to move together from start to finish. By the time the homeowners and we are fully engaged, there is a certain level of familiarity achieved—this is vital as understanding each other makes decision-making smoother.

Here is how the process goes—when clients come to us, we provide them with a draft layout, space planning, concept and cost. This stage can take several weeks or up to a year plus, and we do not ask for any commitment. Once the clients get all the facts, we let them decide whether to engage us or not. This is important to ensure the homeowners and we, as service providers, are on the same page—it is not about the dollars and cents per se. It is a joy to see the

project materialise into a lifestyle home of value that clients will appreciate.

**Having two decades of experience under the belt, what are your plans in the coming decade?**

**Brian:** First, the reality is always to further simplify the process so that people will find it much easier to build their own homes. Second, to relook at alternative forms of building houses, which can cut down time and integrate more sustainable materials. We are working on it—I am very excited to see if we can take it to another level. Third, to further refine the customer experience of this exciting journey. Lastly, down the road, we would also like to go into development to create individual homes of unusual but functional space planning with a big wow factor of our own choice. 