



## Built to Last

Father-and-son **Datuk Seri Michael Yam and James Yam** believe sticking to old-fashioned ethics and principles to build properties which add value to the community around them, writes **Lily O**

**W**HEN I LAST interviewed Datuk Seri Michael Yam, he had just stepped down as president of the Real Estate & Housing Developers' Association (REHDA). Then, he shared about his eagerness to enjoy life as a retiree, by spending quality time with his family. Therefore, you can imagine my surprise when it was announced in 2017 that he was taking on the role of chairman at property development company, Triterra Group.

"It's not a full comeback, you know. I am still semi-retired; I am doing my part to pay it forward to the next generation," explains Datuk Seri Michael to me over breakfast at the showroom of Triterra's commercial project in KL Metropolis called The MET Corporate Towers.

A veteran in real estate, Datuk Seri Michael built his career in big corporations such as Sungei Wang, Peremba Malaysia, Country Heights Holdings, and (now UEM) Sunrise in the past four decades. Countless job offers came knocking on his door after his 'retirement' due to his impressive track record and reputation, but he stuck to his guns by working on an ad hoc consultant basis, through his company Impetus Alliance Advisors. It was his wife, Datin Seri Cindy, who

unintentionally set the motion rolling for him to re-enter the property arena. "One day, I was sitting at a table with him, and he asks me, 'Have you ever thought about the legacy you want to leave behind?' Now, that is a big word—it denotes the impact of what I do to give back to the community around me. It made me realise, I might have 'retired' but who's to say I can't still contribute to society?" he points out.

He pondered over the question and looked inwards at his own life story. Growing up in a small town in Johor to a middle-class family, Datuk Seri Michael learnt the value of independence from a young age. "I went to a boarding school and learnt discipline, and self-reliance. I worked my way up the corporate ladder and went through some difficult life lessons," he says.

Here, he realised that he enjoyed mentoring young talents because it gave him an opportunity to pass on his knowledge and shape others' lives. "Some of the people who worked for me have gone on to become great corporate captains. Maybe there is still more I can do for the future workforce," he says. It was around this time of self-reflection that real estate specialist

Christopher Lim approached Datuk Seri Michael with a golden opportunity. Christopher, who is the son of revered chartered accountant Dato' Wira Lim Teo Kiat, was looking for a partner to execute a commercial development project on Na

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polite young man with a deep, gravelly voice and slicked back hair, James first worked in an oil & gas company, then a property agency before coming on-board Triterra Group.

"Dad's approach to running a business is practical. Aside from emphasising on building quality products, he is strict about monitoring cash flow. This no-nonsense style of leadership is why he wanted me to build my own corporate career first, before joining the family business," says James.

Datuk Seri Michael says he has survived many recessions by vigilantly keeping an eye over profits and losses. "You can only start building properties when you start paying what you owe," he says sensibly.

In his own career trajectory, James has acquired his own mentors, but there is no doubt that his illustrious father's accomplishments have set his benchmark for excellence at a high level.

"Dad is focused on putting the customer first. See, a property—a home or an office building like The MET—is a big investment for your customers. They are signing 30 years of their lives to invest in what you will create for them. It is important to value that trust. He listens to every single stakeholder's concern, even if it seems trivial because you will never know what you can learn from the feedback," he says.

Datuk Seri Michael also believes in pricing a property correctly from the beginning. "Information on property ownership is easily available nowadays; buyers are smart and well-read. So, it is crucial that you set the standards right from the beginning to build their trust," he asserts. This strategy paid off. To date, an estimate of 80 percent of The MET is sold.

Taking a backseat allows his mentees a chance to shine. Datuk Seri Michael revealed to me the story of how James and his team convinced the CEO of a large manufacturing corporation to become an owner-occupant at The MET.

*"When people tell me about how much James impressed them in their*

"I know the CEO of the company personally, but I refused to step in to influence her to a favourable outcome. So when she finally signed on-board, I knew it was all my team's work," he beams.

Datuk Seri Michael shares that he is proud of his son's levelheadedness and humility while learning on the job. "When people come up to me and tell me about how much James impressed them in their dealings with him, it makes me proud—as a mentor and a father—because this praise is fully attributed to his calibre," he says, happy that the next generation is carrying on his legacy. ●



**LEAVING A LEGACY**  
Datuk Seri Michael Yam returned to the property business to pass on his life lessons to the next generation



TTDI's KL Metropolis. Datuk Seri Michael was naturally on the top of Christopher's mind, to be a partner.

"I knew Chris from before and when we met, his passion struck a chord. So I asked my son-in-law Shaun Mok to generate numbers for me about Chris' project offer. Once I looked over the figures, I made up my mind in 10 minutes to jump on-board," recalls Datuk Seri Michael.

It helps that the two families share many similar fundamentals. "The Lims, from Chris to his amazing father Dato' Wira Lim, have

guidance to the young hotshot executive of the company. "I don't micromanage anything. In those days, I would visit the showroom and construction site every day—now I just visit these young ones do it," he says jokingly.

The three main pillars of Triterra Group are stewardship, relevance, and sustainability. This partnership granted the seasoned businessman a platform to continue serving the community in his own way. Datuk Seri Michael takes on an advisory role and leaves the running of the company to Shaun Christopher and his own son, James Yam.