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Sabah yet to fully tap furniture potential

The Malaysian International Furniture Fair (MIFF) was held at the Putra World Trade Centre and the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre from March 1 to 5, 2011 but Sabah made little impact in terms of representation.

Furniture and fittings are part of homes, offices, commercial and industrial properties.

People sit or lie down on them, work and eat on tables, work benches and desks, store things, goods and equipment in cabinets and shelves.

Geomancy or Feng Shui may involve ideal placement of furniture and spaces in a building.

Some property developers in Sabah offer some furniture as part of their attraction for buyers of their houses or apartments.

Developers' showhouses or units are furnished with the finest to attract positive decisions.

Furniture and fittings are necessary to enhance the value utility of properties used by human beings.

Consumers are very lucky today and tend to be spoilt for choice – from food to household furniture and workspace solutions of different brands.

Some Sabahans love to go to IKEA in Singapore or KL to shop for affordable and chic designer furniture and fittings.

Malaysia has earned a reputation overseas for manufacturing high quality solid wood furniture at affordable prices, for example simple hardwood garden furniture from Sabah.

Dr Jegatheswaran Ratnasingam, Associate Professor of the faculty of Forestry at UPM said that MIFF has been growing at an average of 17 per cent each year and is an excellent marketing platform for manufacturers to showcase their products.

"It is a kind of furniture show that is featured strongly in the diary of a lot of large furniture buyers abroad. If we take MIFF's role out of the Malaysian scene, I would say exports would immediately drop by about 35 percent," he said.

When trade fairs and exhibitions around the world reported visitor shrinkage in reaction to downturn, sales orders at MIFF actually increased – the fair netted US\$690 million and US\$710 million in 2008 and 2009, up from 2007's tally of US\$667 million.

About 80 per cent of what furniture

Malaysia produces is exported.

Sabah needs to train more people in the furniture trade. In the past, family run furniture-making business was not actively supported by the government and later due to the New Economic Policy design of favouring some over others leading to the demise of local talents left to rot.

Today Bumiputras are cultivated to succeed in this trade at the KKIP zone by the Malaysian Timber Industry Board. The cabotage policy is another damper for Sabah exporters.

In the 1960s, Sabah had a lot of rattan and wooden furniture-making shops and by the era of the Berjaya administration, KPD had Sabah Rotan subsidiary that had since closed down like many GLCs due to corporate parasitism and abuse of power.

At the last Sabah International Expo, a Malay ex-banker from West Malaysia went into a joint venture with a New Zealander to revive the rattan furniture industry under the sponsorship of the MTIB that provides them a workshop and advice.

The expatriate partner handles the marketing overseas.

Generally the furniture industry, like that of the construction industry, is facing a shortage of skilled labour.

According to Tham Sing Khoo, Deputy CEO of the Malaysian Timber Council (MTC), "The immediate solution to this is to pressure the government to loosen the foreign labour regulations just for the furniture industry.

But this is only short term. Manufacturers must start to look at increasing automation."

Following their futuristic theme of going global last year, MIFF organisers have chosen "Going Green" as this year's theme in line with global concerns about environmental sustainability.

Tham said, "We are talking to NGOs to raise environmental awareness because they often accuse furniture people of destroying forests.

"It is not easy for rubber wood furniture to get sustainability certification as rubber plantations are owned by smallholders. MIFF is trying to develop the regulatory processes to get this certification in place."

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To the Germans, MIFF has been conceived as the 'rubberwood' exposition, which does not carry the kind of furniture fair desirable to Germany.

Dr. Tan Yu Eng, the Program Head of the Advanced Processing & Design Programme, Forest Products Division, Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) said, "MIFF gives the idea that those who participate are of a certain standard in terms of quality and product delivery. It gives a people an idea of your quality."

Malaysians are still perceptively much influenced by the notion that high quality furniture could only come from abroad.

In Sabah, Italian tagged or designed pricey furniture commands higher desirability. More can be done to promote quality Malaysian furniture products to the locals.

Malaysia has more than 600 exporters, and the top 50 exporters make up the bulk of the export volume of 70 percent.

The furniture industry is a "sunrise" endeavor. It is quite the promising industry to be involved in and venture into as the world population keeps growing, especially in countries where, there is an abundance of young families buying homes.

They will need various types and shapes of furniture to furnish their houses and apartments.

In 1995, the total export value of furniture from Malaysia was RM370 million. In 2010, it increased 20-fold to RM7.62 billion.

Such downstream industry from the previous logs and sawn timber trade has propelled Malaysia to the top ten of hard wood furniture producing countries.

The business is still dominated by West Malaysian players and disappointingly the contribution by Sabah and Sarawak aside from garden furniture is still low although the two East Malaysian states have a dominant timber trade with other countries.

Why are foreign buyers at MIFF keen to source for Malaysian furniture? It is because of the solid wood.

Sabah and Sarawak used to have a lot of solid timber wood but failed to shine in the furniture trade on the world stage in a big way.

One hurdle could be a lack of ideas and international exposure. Another could be the negative baggage of illegal logging of tropical hardwoods.

Softwoods are grown in some forest

plantations mainly for the paper industry.

As a member of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), the Malaysian timber industry benchmarks its activities according to worldwide logging and forest preservation standards.

The National Timber Certification Council's voluntary national timber certification scheme helps Malaysian furniture exporters by assuring buyers that wood-based products have been sourced from sustainably managed forests.

According to a trade visitor, the most disappointing aspect this year is a very noticeable decline in presentation standards; the majority of exhibitors appear to have ignored the potential pulling power and brand value addition that professional booth design can bring.

During his four years as a member of the MIFF Best Presentation Award's panel of judges, Chief Judge Ahmad Asmadi Mohammad said both booth presentation standards have been static.

Judging criteria involves booth presentation, functionality and construction technique.

"In the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) industry, it is "creativity – that is, design – translates into quality as perceived by visitors. Exhibitors should see the bigger picture. Creative booth presentation attracts visitors. And that could translate into more sales.

That is marketing," stressed Chief Judge Ahmad Asmadi Mohammad.

Putting Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) labels all over the walls and proclaiming various and sometimes questionable "green" attributes is simply not good enough.

One of the foreign attendees at MIFF was Daniel Korb, a Swiss architect and furniture designer. He said, "Take care that whatever we do is not wasted; there is no waste in nature."

Korb was referring to the cradle-to-cradle concept, which involves a global revolution among designers to copy from nature's processes in modern industrial design.

Korb explored the term "meaningful spaces" by showing how harmonising the relationship between different objects in a space gives more meaning to architecture.

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Sabah's solid wood furniture a favourite among foreign buyers.