



**Cubes: Tell us how Kenneth Cobonpue is really like.**

**Kenneth Cobonpue (KC):** Hmm... it's hard to describe yourself. I guess I'm always curious, soft spoken and a hands-on person. I don't really like to speak that much. You know, it isn't something I do for a living. Rather, I chose to be a designer because my designs can best express who I am. That's why.

**What got you hooked onto design?**

**KC:** Strange thing is, I knew I've always liked to make things with my hands. I knew it even before I came to know its name. But of course, since my mother [Betty Cobonpue] is a designer, yeah... she influenced me a great deal as I grew up watching what she did.

**Why furniture design then?**

**KC:** Well, my mother set up a factory right in our backyard! A small group of carpenters worked for her. You could say that was my playground. And every morning when I woke up, I learnt how to build things. It helps that there's already an infrastructure in place. It's so convenient to design and have your designs made there and then. I didn't have to go through a panel of approval or anything like that.

Actually, I've a soft spot for fashion too. But I just like to wear fashion; I don't want to design it. Truth is, fashion is a very bitchy world, unlike the furniture world where people are really nice. Wherever you go, this industry is a lot about personal relationships. I can't say the same for the fashion industry. It's competitive.

**What's your stand on machine-made furniture?**

**KC:** I don't fancy furniture that's produced by machines. All the processes that go into making mine are purely 100% handmade. And that's the beauty in my creations. I think it's the fact that someone really thought about your chair and poured sweat into making it that makes what you own truly valuable. It won't be just another furniture piece churned out by a machine in China but you're sitting on something made by human hands. This practice is dying in the world today. Nowadays, most of the things are really impersonal.

**Why this fascination with organic materials in your creations?**

**KC:** For one, I was exposed to it at an early age. Also, all around me, everything grows from the soil. It's all about nature and its natural quality. I was essentially moving towards a relatively new direction when I first started out with my designs, what with rattan and other organic materials. In fact, I was far more concerned with creating aesthetically pleasing furniture. I didn't really make them so they'd sell well.

**Does having your name as a brand make a difference?**

**KC:** To a great extent, yes. Now that more people are acquainted with my brand, it's a constant reminder that every piece carries my name. And that makes all the difference. If the brand carries your name, it's personal. You just can't throw any design into the market to see whether it sells. That means you've to maintain a certain standard. That's why I come up with only a few collections a year. The whole creative process takes time. I've to be happy with what I see. Even so, I've bills to think of!

**Is there a particular piece that you especially like?**

**KC:** I like the first piece that I did. It's called *Yin and Yang* easy armchair. Because it's the first design I made, it's always close to my heart. I also like the *Dragnet* lounge chair. It's quite different because when you work with natural materials, they're usually brown. Being totally red, this definitely adds a splash of colour.

**What inspires you?**

**KC:** I always try to find beauty in ordinary things, which is a challenge. Be it a tree or rock, as long as it's natural, it inspires me. I'm even inspired by bread, just like the *Croissant* sofa I designed.

**Does inspiration come to you naturally?**

**KC:** No, that's a myth. You really have to look for inspiration. When people say it comes naturally, it's a lie. Dry spells happen. I just get out of it and do it some other time. There's no particular place to source for inspiration too. It can come anywhere, like when I'm in a coffee shop or on a train.



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**What do you attribute your success to?**

**KC:** I think it boils down to the uniqueness of what I'm doing. Southeast Asia has been the producer for furniture or other things for the longest time - never a designer. Traditionally, there's always somebody from the West, say America or Europe, who sends in the design and you're only the factory and backdoor. What I do is the other way around. We've a Southeast Asian brand here, carrying my name - proudly saying it comes from Southeast Asia. It's a brand based on things in Southeast Asia, built on things that are Southeast Asian. So, in that way, what I'm doing stands out from the rest.

**What embodies the ideal of Southeast Asian design then?**

**KC:** I think it's characterised by materials, especially the natural fibres that we have. There's intensive human labour involved, making furniture by hand. A lot of forms are organic as they're derived from nature. Sadly, it hasn't always been like that. I'd like to think that I'm part of a new generation. I suppose you can say that I was one of the first



to pave the way for young designers in Southeast Asia to be recognised - to say to the world that we can stand as tall as our Italian counterparts. Now it's difficult because China is making everything. But an area where they can't compete is when it comes to defining the level of skill and quality, which I feel is very important and is a strength that Southeast Asia has. And that may be the only way for us to compete against China.

**Where do you think Southeast Asian design is heading?**

**KC:** It's heading towards a much specialised, high-quality design, high-end market direction. Southeast Asia used to be the producer for medium and low-end furniture range. But now, there's no other choice but to go in this other direction because China is taking the low-end market.

**Do you think awards are overrated?**

**KC:** Basically, it's a marketing tool. On that note, it's nice to be recognised for what you're doing still. The prestigious one I remembered was the Design for Asia Award 2005 held in Hong Kong. Throughout the night, there were finalists like Nokia, Philips, LG and Samsung - really high-tech stuff. And suddenly, there's a rattan collection called Lolah in the midst. So, for the judges to let a rattan chair win, it must have really struck them.

**Any insight on upcoming trends in furniture design?**

**KC:** Organically-inspired design is the emerging trend. Look at the architecture now and it's apparent. For instance, the Beijing Olympic Stadium that's shaped like a bird's nest. The top architects right now adopt forms inspired by nature. It's very organic and not defined by geometric lines. I like what I'm seeing, of course.

**What do you think fame has brought you?**

**KC:** Being famous just gives you less time for yourself and your family. So, that's the only gripe that I have. Relationships are important to me, more so than business as my priorities in life are my family and friends.

**Despite the fame, what keeps you grounded?**

**KC:** I think living in the Philippines and being with the workers keep me grounded. They're the ones who turn my dreams into reality by making my furniture. And that keeps me humble.

**If you're not a designer, what do you think you would have ended up as?**

**KC:** I'd probably be in the theatre scene. It has this make-believe appeal where you can just simply create your own stage, your own world - kind of like what I do in design. I said I was soft-spoken but you know what, in my opinion, the best actors are not necessarily people who are loud by nature.

**What do you do for leisure?**

**KC:** I like to restore vintage sports cars! Thing is, I don't have much time to do all these things anymore, so much so that I've forgotten what else I used to like to do.

**Your pet peeve is...**

**KC:** When people copy my designs. That's the worst thing ever! ■

**Kenneth Cobonpue's furniture is available at Proof Living.**

# inside her world

IN INTERIOR ARCHITECT AND DESIGNER DELPHINE LEON'S WORLD, THERE IS MUCH SPACE FOR ART, COLOURS AND MERGING INFLUENCES - AND NONE FOR TELEVISION.

"I'm very disturbed when I go into a place which is completely subtle. When you go into a space, wherever it is, you want to get a feeling, a nice vibe and to feel comfortable", says Delphine Leon, as she sips her morning cup of coffee.

"As French, I like places with, what you call it, character...and history," Leon says. She is the managing director of interior design firm D'apres Nous D & B (DNDB). Having moved from shophouse clusters Duxton Hill then to Emerald Hill, the firm has now settled in a light-filled office at Delfi Orchard. This was a practical decision; the retail business, Veldt, she shares with two partners needs a retail space of its own. Delfi Orchard is just the right spot for it, and managing both is made easier by proximity.

DNDB, set up with her business partner, Guillaume Multrier, started humbly with mainly office space projects, and then to residential and retail spaces. Now, its portfolio has expanded to include some of the most stylish resorts and hotels in the Maldives, namely, Huvafen Fushi and Cocopalm Bodu Hiithi. The firm has recently been engaged to revamp Club Med Bintan Island and other Club Med resorts in the Asia Pacific, in line with Club Med's move into the upscale luxury resort market.

There's something very likeable about Leon. It could be the traces of French accent that are just about disappearing. It could also be how candid she gets with her answers. Say, for example, as to why she moved to Singapore to work, she lets slip, chuckling, "I didn't want to work in France making coffee before I have an interesting project to do."

The interior architect and designer arrived in Singapore ten years ago after attaining her Master's Degree in Interior Design & Product Design from Ecole Camondo, Paris. After four years in the interior design industry, she ventured out with DNDB.

Text by Rossara Jamili Images courtesy of DNDB



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A childhood filled with weekends of hunting for antiques thanks to her mother's passion for antiques ("We were going to remote places during weekends to find this type of cabinet, this type of old light," she says.), and it's no wonder then that her interest lies in design.

Along the way, she has developed an eye for mixing influences. She describes her design aesthetics, "I definitely like to mix. I like the combination of modern antique, modern ethnic. I don't like to go in one direction fully."

Case in point is the home she shares with her husband and two young daughters, which she describes as a mix of everything. "There's a bit of Asian influence. Our house is really colourful. Our main living room and dining room consists of orange and purple tones with beige and dark woods. Because I'm passionate about art, we have a lot of artwork, which is where the colours come from."

She takes a yearly trip to a new place with her family for discovery's sake. Every year, too, they head back to France so they could catch up with family back home and when time permits, she switches on the projector set at home and watches films –

from big productions to those a little off the beaten track. She reveals a quirky and almost-unbelievable nugget of information: she has not watched television for more than 10 years.

Even then, like many of us, time is an issue she grapples with. She says emphatically, "I think the big problem in humanity now is...look at 20 years ago, before computers were so developed in every single office or family and because everything was by hand or paper, you had time to think properly. You have this whole development of the project in your head when you do a project. It takes time. Now, because communication is so fast, it's a problem because your head can't follow the communication level."

"Clients send an email, expecting an answer in five minutes, an hour a day. It's not the way it works. Creative work takes time to think and get mature. It's not A+B=C. It's not the reality. In our type of job, it's becoming a real problem. I don't see how creativity can follow, because everything is so fast. You just can't, or you end up doing mediocre projects, because you don't have time to do brilliant projects," she muses over the increasingly common urban predicament. ■