He’ll release your mind from captivity

In the wake of Ah Meng’s death, CHEAH UI-HOON catches up with Bernard Harrison to find out what the former zoo chief has been up to

"Ninety per cent are miserable though, with horrible conditions for the animals," admits Mr Harrison, citing Singapore, North America, Northern Europe and Australia as having the best zoos. "A good zoo will be like Club Med, and a bad zoo like a prison, for the animals," he says.

But perhaps soon, the situation could change for the better, especially in Asia. The two projects in India he’s consulting for, a zoo in Delhi and another in Maharashtra, could well signal a positive change in how zoos are built. In China too, authorities are moving on the path of enlightenment, as Mr Harrison has been asked to give a workshop on master planning for zoos this year.

The reason why BH&F is called the way it is, is that Mr Harrison works only with friends – people he knows – which is a network of some 60 consultants around the world, all of whom are specialists in their own field, from IT designers to landscape architects.

"We are the epitome of a global company... I’ll tender for a job, and put together a team for it, and if we get it, we’ll come together in that city where the job is to brainstorm," he explains. "Business and design workshops are held simultaneously, and we also engage the local government to come up with a final business plan and concept."

And if you’d like to know, managing a group of consultants isn’t an easy task, he adds.

Creativity for Mr Harrison – who has a masters in design, incidentally – was first expressed through Singapore’s Zoo and Night Safari. The Night Safari idea, in fact, he credits to the late Lyn de Alwis, the former director of Sri Lanka’s Colombo Zoo, who had come up with the idea, and who had helped Singapore design it.

Now, Mr Harrison is making a natural progression from creating great environments for animals in captivity to creating environments where human minds can be freed to roam. And in case you want to know which animal he’s rooting for to become Singapore Zoo’s next mascot, it’ll be an orang utan; even if he and Ah Meng didn’t really get along, he divulges.