



HKIA

Change is Coming!!! - HKIA

“Harbourfront planning, building safety, heritage conservation, urban renewal, urban design- all of these are related to the building environment of Hong Kong that impacts its residents.” Improvisation is the need of the hour, according to VINCENT NG, President of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA).

By JOHNNY TSE CHUN LAI

Despite a plethora of constraints, Hong Kong's architectural sector must stay competitive in keeping with our claim to being a world-class city. Vincent Ng speaks candidly on our need to pave a path amidst the maze.

Mediavision (MZ): What are your aspirations as President of the HKIA?

Vincent Ng (NG): I have been practicing as an architect in Hong Kong for 28 years, and in the recent 15 years I have been very active in the Hong Kong Institute of Architects. I have spent a lot of time on issues other than my own practice, with a vision to improve society and the environment. I took up the position of President of HKIA earlier this year, and for these two years I would endeavour to achieve three goals.

First, I would like to promote architectural excellence. I believe that architects will only have a good environment to work in when the general public knows what architecture is and how to appreciate it. We need to promote architectural excellence to the public through media, exhibitions, and walking tours throughout Hong Kong.

Secondly, architects have got to have a louder voice in society, in terms that ordinary people understand. We want to express professional opinions about town planning, our environment, the building conditions of Hong Kong, government policies. Harbourfront planning, urban renewal, urban design, building safety, heritage conservation – all of these



HKIA President Vincent Ng being interviewed on the shape of things to come.

impact the residents of Hong Kong.

Thirdly, we need to let our young architects see hope. Young architects are full of energy, creativity and dreams. But when they enter society and the real working environment, they see a lot of things that are very different from what they experienced in university. So how do they continue their dreams, their original intention of studying architecture? We are not saying that there is no difference from studying architecture and reality, but at the same time, we don't want them to be discouraged by what they see in the real practice. The HKIA wants to serve as a resource to guide young architects in achieving and pursuing their dreams regardless.

MZ: What can HKIA do to bridge the gap between academics and the needs of the industry?

NG: HKIA endeavours to ensure that stu-

dents trained in university are equipped to become architects working in Hong Kong. We advise schools on their curriculum, and provide the necessary training and mentoring for students when they enter the real world. The school curriculum needs to be recognized every 5 years, and HKIA acts as an accreditation board. Thus, there is always a maintained dialogue between HKIA and universities. When students graduate and are preparing to become a Registered Architect, we conduct courses on examinations and assign advisors, who support the candidates with practical experience and advice.

In terms of human resources, we always feel the need for more talent in the field. If Hong Kong had the resources to train more architects, such as teachers and university funding, we would support the opening of one more degree programme in architectural studies. The

potential of architects is unlimited – they can become urban designers, interior designers, writers, columnists, architecture critics, even politicians! I would never say that we have too many architects.

The City, The Industry, The Future

MZ: As a competitive Asian city, what do you think our skyline needs in terms of architecture and construction?

NG: Hong Kong's skyline is already very unique, with its tall buildings highlighted by mountains behind and the Harbour in front. However, I wouldn't say that we are satisfied with the urban environment that we have. We can see a nice harbour from afar, but there are difficulties arriving at the harbourfront via highway, and when you actually arrive, there is not much to do. Other world cities such as London, Sydney, San Francisco and Vancouver have much more attractive waterfronts. The amusement park and big Ferris wheel is a good attempt to activate the harbour, but we still need more planning in terms of accessibility.

Another realization is that the big shopping malls in Hong Kong don't really look so different from one another. On a local scale, we want to keep and promote the vibrant Hong Kong street culture, which gives the city its real character and identity. There are also many heritage buildings that tell stories about the past, compared to big, glamorous, glossy skyscrapers. Hong Kong should appreciate and enhance what it already has, rather than destroy something good and rebuild in the name of development.

MZ: What can be done to balance heritage and structural culture against modern intelligent buildings?

NG: I think it comes down to changing people's mindsets on what is valuable. Hong Kong society currently has a value system oriented in terms of money, and so past developers focused on developing Hong Kong without looking at artistry or local culture. We are now starting to realize that Hong Kong has to have its own identity, a place that looks like its own citizens. There are other values we need to consider, like local culture, traditions, and historic buildings. We are not saying we preserve the city as it is and stop developing, but rather put all the values into perspective. Can we increase office space without destroying heritage and local culture? Instead of tearing down buildings, we could set up new business

districts, outside of Central and Admiralty, such as Kai Tak and Kowloon East, and new towns like Hung Shui Kiu.

MZ: What do you see in the future of architectural style? Is it trending towards Western culture, or a hybrid of modern buildings with a Chinese flavour?

NG: The boundary between the West and the East is becoming increasingly less clear-cut because of globalization. You don't have to be in a place to build something there. With technology, we can draw something in the office, press a button, and send the drawings to the site.

I cannot comment on what style will prevail, but there will certainly be a lot of universal values that are upcoming. In the past, there was a focus on architectural style, such as Westernized, Chinese, Modernist, Classical, Postmodernist, and even highly form-making architecture like Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid. In the future though, there will be universal values like sustainable buildings, roof gardens, how to conserve energy and protect the environment. Imagine a shopping mall with a big atrium. Could we omit the skylight and let it breathe naturally instead? When all architects consider energy-saving features for their designs, it will affect our city.

Also, when we start to consider architecture outside the site's boundaries, we try to make it part of the city. So instead of building a large building that you can celebrate yourself on, we have to think more about ventilation, circulation, connectivity. Architects in the future will be more concerned about the city's fabric, about urban design and planning instead of simply a building.

MZ: Please comment on the quality of architecture education in Hong Kong.

NG: I have been acting as external examiner for the University of Hong Kong for 3 years, so I have been very aware of architecture education in Hong Kong. I think universities in Hong Kong have done a good job in terms of conceptual depth and artistic presentation, but they need to strengthen handling the more practical issues of architecture.

If you think about how the people use the building, your design will be much more sensitive on the placement of doors, corridors, toilets, and windows. Where does light come into the building? More attention should be put into this than form making. I don't want to see a big gap between the academic and the prac-

itioner. The school should continue to be innovative and creative, but it cannot ignore the fundamentals of architecture, that architecture is for people to use and to feel.

MZ: Should young architects be prepared to 'specialize'?

NG: There is no harm in specialization. As a young architect, you need to learn and see more before you decide what to specialize in. I don't want to see young architects become specialists in one aspect and know nothing else. Architecture is a complex process, which requires work with a lot of people, from structural engineers, quantity surveyors, to the government's highway department, building department, fire services, town planning, so on and so on. Combined with the professional technicalities, these are all things architects need to know. I think young architects should be exposed to all this before deciding what to do.

The Man in the Mirror

MZ: Why did you choose to become an architect?

NG: I actually started my path to architecture a long time ago, in the 70s, when a secondary school teacher of mine suggested I choose architecture for university. Most of my classmates aimed at studying medicine, but as a keen lover of arts and music, I was adamant against medicine. With my secondary school very close to the University of Hong Kong, I decided to go up to the studio there and see for myself what happened there. The works of the architecture students there were so inspiring that I decided that this was the subject that I would take.

MZ: What is your favourite building in HK?

NG: Buildings are not just about the structure and designs and external appearance – they are related to your own experience, and stories to tell. The building that I love the most is my alma mater King's College, and it's more than just the architecture, the old red brick building from colonial times. It's about the seven years I spent there, and the knowledge of every nook and cranny. ■

For additional information please visit www.hkia.net