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Ideas in Design

STUDIO VISIT

Colin Seah

Ministry of Design's Founder and Design Director shares the inner workings of his award-winning Bar Code office in Singapore, some updates on his projects, and how he sees design in Asia would be over the next few years.

INTERVIEW BY ASIH JENIE

It's almost four years since you moved to the Bar Code office, what's new?

We have this thing called "Fruit of Your Labor", which is an internal award that we give to colleagues for a whole range of things; we prize a lot of traits in people, which is really what the studio is about. It's not only the physical space but it's also about a group of people, and people who must like each other and must work well together and must enjoy working well together. On different years, people excel on different things, so it's like a mojo awards.

What's a typical day at the office?

Our day is incredibly packed but we try and maintain as sane hours as possible. We start earlier, like 8:30 — most design firms start at 10 or 10:30. We try to end by 6:30 or 7:00 but the hours that we gain are taken off from Fridays so we can finish early on Friday, like on 3:30 so you'll have longer weekends. On weekdays you work really intensive and hard, you don't drag it out. The day is fast and furious and before you know it, it's over. But then we don't bring work home, and I don't work on weekends, so that's the price we pay for that luxury.

Tell us about your design approach, the "essentialism".

We decided early on that we're too young to really determine either genre or the end result that we're keen on. We figured that every project will have its own unique idea or vantage point or trajectory, so what we would do is we'll be very disciplined and attempt to execute that idea throughout the scale, from the detail to the big picture, all would fall in the same rhythm behind that idea. Essentialism is then the destination of that idea.

Give us an example.

Vanke Yan Tai project for instance. It's a series of towers with a podium unlike the typical big fat "cake" with towers sticking out from it like candles. Here, the essential idea is whether you can merge the horizontal podium with the vertical towers to create one continuous form. That's the idea, you see, so essentialise that idea, and that's the solution. If you look at our work — even the bigger pieces — we attempt to at least maintain that kind of integrity to the idea, which is essentialism.

And you always start this approach by asking questions?

Yeah. You know people say ask any questions, there's no such thing as stupid questions. Yes, there are. Often you're given briefs that are very generic; it's all quantitative. If it's qualitative, it's all very vague like "contemporary" — what the hell does that mean, right? So you have to ask yourself another kind of question, like for Macalister Mansion; the brief was a cool boutique hotel; now the question we asked ourselves was: because it's so small, it can't really function like a hotel, it's more like a home. So what would coming to a home to stay in be like? That's the essential question. So the whole branding is not a hotel; it's a mansion.

If you start by asking questions, how do you know when to stop and if the answer is right?

I always know. It is just a very clear feeling. Even when sometimes we have to stop before we want to, I'll know if it's not right. Or if we have extra time I know we should stop already. I think it's the training that I got by teaching and being a studio master for four years, and also having perhaps, criticality. I've always enjoyed asking questions, and only when the answers are satisfactory then I stop asking. I think that's one of the key roles I play as a Design Director.

Do you always find the answer?

I often get very frustrated and agitated; knowing that the answer is not right but you don't know how to get it right. That's the "disturb" part on our mantra "question-disturb-redefine" and it's very difficult. I'm very optimistic, in the sense where I figure, well, there's another project to go on to and the only project that is forever is the studio, and the people, which is us. Because we generate the ideas, we make it real.

What are you working on right now?

We're working on an invited international competition to design a scheme for a boutique hotel that sits just about a hundred metres in front of Tadao Ando's museum in Beijing.

PHOTO: COURTESY MINISTRY OF DESIGN.

Inside Ministry Of Design's office.

PHOTO: ELWIN GOH.

We're also working on three hotel projects right now and all three are different. One is a hundred-year-old cinema in Penang we are converting into a very lifestyle-driven function and F&B hotel. Another one is a sort of business, edgy lifestyle hotel for Capri. The last one is the masterplan, architecture and interior for a resort project off the coast of Phuket.

There are also two other humongous masterplans. One is a million square-feet mixed-use retail and residential and it's our first really big thing that's being built right now. The other one is in Guangzhou, three million square-feet.

There's the big stuff and there's also the small stuff. We are also working with Yoichi Nakamuta, the Japanese curator who works with Tom Dixon and Nendo, for a furniture exhibition in upcoming Maison et Objet in Singapore. We're very excited to be included because the rest are product designers. We're going to contribute two products to the line—a mirror and a chair.

What's your most challenging project to date?

The most challenging, design-wise, for its scale versus how long has it taken, is my own house.

Because you are your own client?

Yes, precisely. For this project, there isn't objectivity, there isn't this rational aspect that's just as simple as establishing a question and solving it. The question keeps changing, and also over two years, your life experiences and what you think you want out of life has also changed. It's taken almost two years and eight versions. At one point I put it down and I didn't want to see it for two months. But finally in version eight I'm actually really happy. It's really distilled and I would say that the essential question is completely answered.

How do you see design in Asia evolving over the next few years?

I think it'll be a confluence of ideas from all over the world. It's very interesting because Asia is the hotspot right now. It has the most pioneering areas like Myanmar, Vietnam, more established ones like Malaysia and Japan, and also the mid-developed like China. In the next few years I don't think the quality of work will be consistent, but they will definitely be concentrated here. There will be, I think, a strange amalgamation. Imagine you're Dutch and then you're working in Shanghai, do you understand traditional culture enough to draw from it or is it going to be prestige of the superficial—which most likely it would be. But at the same time you bring that Dutchness to equation, maybe that's something relevant for China. The past is one thing but its future cannot be a trajectory from the past alone.

PHOTO: VANKE YAN TAI COURTESY MINISTRY OF DESIGN.

RETAIL Bookmarc Tokyo

Marc Jacobs continues his journey into the world of bookselling with the opening of his fifth Bookmarc store, and his first in Asia. It's a story of a 13-year friendship in itself, Bookmarc Tokyo just the latest in a long line of commercial collaborations between Marc Jacobs and New York-based Jaklitsch / Gardner Architects. The store, which sells a selection of books curated by Jacobs, stationery and branded products like iPad cases, is located in the trendy Harajuku/Ometesando district of Tokyo. Jaklitsch / Gardner opted for an industrial aesthetic as the basis of the 90-square-metre space, with the pre-existing concrete walls and flooring left intact, exposed metal and a glass façade and entrance. Concrete steps at the front lead down to the Marc Jacobs menswear store in the basement. A vintage cast-iron table is placed in the centre of the street-level bookstore. The table serves as a place to display goods and can be used by customers, who can swing out a wood-topped stool and settle down to leaf through the pages of a photography tome or the biography of a cultural icon. The raw surroundings are softened by the custom-built shelves in birch, repeated in the display units and counter, spinning the tale of the Marc Jacobs brand with a good measure of intellectual understatement. **—Alice Davis**

ARCHITECTURE CDL Green Gallery

In Singapore's Botanic Gardens, a zero-energy green gallery has opened, designed to host small exhibitions related to the horticultural life of the proudly green nation. The City Developments Limited (CDL) Green Gallery, in collaboration with National Parks and designed by DP Architects, uses a range of sustainable technologies, eco materials and environmentally sound processes. The 314-square-metre gallery has broken ground in becoming the first building in Singapore to use the hemp-based concrete, Hempcrete. The biomaterial, a combination of hemp core, lime binders and water, has been used to create the façade. As a building material, Hempcrete outperforms both concrete and glass, is pest, mould and fire resistant, and actually absorbs atmospheric carbon. With the gallery's living walls and its solar photovoltaic roof panels, which create more than enough power to operate the building, the CDL Gallery is comprehensively green. Because Hempcrete can be precast, the construction was carried out off-site at a factory. It took less than 24 hours to assemble the gallery once at the Botanic Gardens, making it less labour intensive and kinder to the land. **—Alice Davis**

PHOTOS: RETAIL, COURTESY BOOKMARC TOKYO. ARCHITECTURE, COURTESY CITY DEVELOPMENTS LIMITED.