



SPACE

HOW TO BE AN HONEST ARCHITECT

ROBERT CHENG

Robert Cheng of Brewin Design Office believes that good work hinges not just on what, but also why we design.

BY LUO JINGMEI



The first time I met Robert Cheng was when Brewin Design Office was established, located in a quaint modernist block at Tiong Bahru, Singapore. He had recently completed the Screened House, whose aluminum skin enabled dialog with the tropical and street context. But it was the inside – parapets morphed into circulation, the structure into sculpture, graphic blocks of light and space – that resonated.

That was seven years ago. Cheng now works with a staff of 15 from a larger office in the Henderson industrial estate. Here, large, framed paintings enliven bare white walls, revealing his passion for art. He has built an impressive, handsome work portfolio starring material dexterity and rich, layered scenography over the years. Amongst them are Blossom (a Chinese restaurant whose symphony of bulbous alcoves line Marina Bay Sands' foyer), the National Art Gallery's dignified Museum Library, and an array of achingly elegant residential interiors, such as the Ardmore Penthouse and show unit of Eden condominium designed by British architect Thomas Heatherwick.

Cheng is a rarity in the local design scene. His preoccupation with designing every joint and every surface reflects an artisanal approach, not unlike a jewelry or watch designer. "I don't think there is a partition between design scales and typologies. It's much more a vocation of being able to design a project without compromise," he says.

The 43-year-old hesitates to use the word 'craft' in describing his method. In recent times, the word has been so loosely employed that its poignancy is now diluted. True craft, Cheng ruminates and stems from being aware of how space feels and not just how it looks on paper. It should align with the user's personality so that he or she feels an affinity with it.

This rudimentary way of understanding design is sorely missing today, resulting in Pinterest pretty but spatially banal works that can appear 'crafted' through good photography, lighting, and styling. Undeniably, increased digitalization plays a role in producing a generation of desensitized architects.

"In school, students are now more interested in parametric than construction techniques or space making, so houses today have lost the intricacy and intimacy in defining space. It may be a different era, but that doesn't mean that these things shouldn't be thought about," says Cheng.

To illustrate the 'feeling' in architecture, he invites me to his father, Edmund Cheng's house. The deputy chairman of Wing Tai Holdings had engaged Paul Rudolph to design it. Famed for site-specific and structurally inventive works like The Colonnade and The Concourse in Singapore, the famed American architect passed on from cancer in 1998 after completing the schematic design, but the house was built with the help of a few friends who are designers.

Even then, Cheng shares that it is a perennial work in progress. Today, he, his father, and a host of other collaborators add and alter elements; his contributions include an asymmetrical duo of Art Deco-inspired armchairs and a secretive black wall that unfolds to a display of Japanese ceramics. When I visited, Cheng – articulate, wistful, and polite to a fault – apologized for ongoing construction to turn a water feature into a new sculpture's backdrop. His father had also curtained the modestly scaled house with a soft cloud of bamboo plants and invited a Japanese artist to wrap the powder room in washi paper.

Rudolph's signature language of expressing structure results in the enigmatic layering of space. Bridges dip low enough to touch from below, and stacked rooms soar upward, awakening the senses. "The same spaces are encountered (from different vantage points), so the house is never boring. There's so much to cherish from this kind of designing where it's about the experience, subtlety, and prolonged journey through spaces and programs," says Cheng.





The holistic blending of art, furniture, and structure also gives rise to a Gesamtkunstwerk or artwork. Materials, such as a bathroom's marble floor and the study room's figured sycamore cabinetry designed by Cheng, exhibit timeworn patina that, the architect highlights, is more burden than charm to many Singaporeans.

Growing up in such a home, having an architect father, and close interactions with world-renowned architects and artists etched timeless design lessons into his psyche. At 16, he interned at A61, the firm where his father practiced. Here, Cheng found mentors in several architects who have gone on to helm successful firms, such as Chan Soo Khian of SCDA Architects and Ko Shiou Hee of K2LD Architects. His education at the Rhode Island School of the Arts (RISD) and the Graduate School of Design at Harvard broadened his knowledge of myriad design disciplines. At the same time, his work experience at New York's Tsao & McKown and Jean Nouvel's Paris atelier deepened his design acumen.

Ko recalls the young Cheng as being respectful and well-mannered. "I remember his essays, which he sent to me, were full of creativity. His school projects were unique and quirky. When he worked briefly for me after coming back to Singapore, his design approach was always different from everybody else – that's why he is where he is today, and I'm very proud of his achievements."

Cheng's holistic and meticulous attitude to design is both a blessing and a curse. He bemoans how Singapore's harried construction pace leaves little time for an intensive design study and how clients will pay for a beautiful building but not a little more for a well-balanced interior whose importance as touchpoints of daily living is underrated.



"Many clients put a different value to construction. So, where does a career like mine go when you have an audience that doesn't understand what you're trying to do? Do I dilute my work to expand or maintain a modestly sized firm and not compromise while searching for clients who will give me enough budget because a permanent and timeless project requires the right funds?" says Cheng, who has mulled over the idea of becoming his own client to promote his ethos.

His pensiveness stems from the firm turning ten next year and taking on a larger scale, commercial work, such as the interior architecture of 54 units of a condominium in town and the Robinson Centre office tower's renovation. He still enjoys what he does and is optimistic about making a difference but is prompted to think about what kind of career he wants down the long road where a successful architect begins to mature only at 60.

This conundrum is common in the industry, and decisions made at the fork separate the good from the best. Thus, Cheng abhors at how many young architects skip the necessary years of learning, resulting in substandard work. Like how a film director or author scrutinizes each scene or page, designing should not be glossed over.

"It is an architect's responsibility to ensure [the occupants] have a better environment," says Cheng. "You owe it to yourself as an architect and designer to continually drive at your work, to establish your own identity knowing who inspires you. If you do it too quickly, you end up copying. Then you're missing the big lesson, that is to master what it means for a space to feel a certain way."

The words of architect and now family friend Jean Nouvel serves as a good reminder that "architecture is an art – that's what people forget more and more. It has the potential to affect us, to move us – that's the aim of all art." ^P