

PROJECT CENTRE |

Building blocks of the future

HK is the place to be for architects given its infrastructure, sustained building investment, high optimism and energy, writes **Billy Clarke**

Hong Kong has always been an architectural hub, with some of the best talent in Asia and the world, and, today, its architecture industry is alive and vigorously kicking.

"With its mixed international pool of architects and proficiency gathered over time, the Hong Kong architecture industry is perfectly set up as a hub to serve the region," says Dominic Lam, president of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA).

"In fact, more than 50 per cent of Hong Kong architects end up working on projects outside Hong Kong," he adds.

The CEO of architecture global giant Aedas, David Roberts, shares the same sentiment, describing Hong Kong as a "strategically-placed business destination".

"The proximity to Southeast Asia is important," he says. "A lot of clients [from there] look to Hong Kong professionals to provide provisional services for their projects. Hong Kong has a huge advantage in terms of its geographical location."

However, this regional market is dwarfed by business in China, which has surged two-fold in the

past few years. "The workload from mainland China has been increasing, and 60 per cent of the work in our Hong Kong office is from the mainland," says Roberts.

"Ten years ago, this would have been only about 10 per cent and, looking ahead, the 60 per cent might become 70 per cent soon," he adds.

This is felt throughout other practices in Hong Kong, too. Kenneth Lui, a director with the P&T Group, even points out that increasing mainland work is putting pressure on local and international architects to learn Putonghua.

"One of the most important things for an architect in Hong Kong now is language – even locals need to learn Putonghua," he says. "One must also be willing to travel and to work on the mainland."

Lucy Richardson, managing director of Bespoke Hong Kong, is seeing the same trends at her local architect and designer recruitment firm. "At the moment, 80 to 90 per cent of candidates we place are Chinese, and this is mainly because of the language factor," she says. "We are finding it more and more



P&T Group's Huiyu Hanyang Huafa Project in Wuhan, Hubei, in China – a giant magnet for architects. Photo: P&T Group

difficult to place international architects because they don't have the language skills."

Candidates need to know more than just Putonghua though, as Richardson points out. "Those who are most in demand are the locals who have trained overseas, who have had experiences with international practices and are returning home to the mainland or Hong Kong," says Richardson.

"Although graduates are of interest, the Chinese market is looking for broad-minded architects who have done two to 10 years in a practice overseas, and have come back with understanding, training and experience."

Richardson also points out that while there are some strong candidates coming out of local schools, Hong Kong-educated students

are slightly weaker than their international counterparts.

"I think that the brief set in universities here is a bit basic, and does not really get people thinking – it is a lot more challenging at Australian, British and American universities," Richardson says.

P&T Group principal designer Remo Riva agrees, adding that creativity is somewhat disregarded in Hong Kong. "At universities here, they teach that management skills are very important and creativity is more a by-product because it is not so needed or expected," Riva says. "Even at the University of Hong Kong, the emphasis is not so much on teaching or on creativity, but about training for management skills."

Creativity is also lacking in the field, where developers dominate and tough regulations restrict architects. "Basically, to be approved, the architecture has to work around and within the regulations and demands of developers, which reduces

creativity. In other places, you look at buildings and you can see the developers are more open," says Lui, of P&T Group.

He adds that developers are also snapping up talent, which means that local demand for architects remains strong.

Nevertheless, HKIA's Lam says that the architectural scene is healthier than it has ever been, and fresh graduates can expect to start at a competitive monthly rate of HK\$30,000 minimum, which is the highest that entry-level salaries have been in the sector.

Roberts of Aedas has the same positive viewpoint. "Hong Kong has been able to grow domestic talent through the universities and educational establishments here, while also attracting international talent, even as markets are quiet in places like New York and London," he says.

"We have some of the best infrastructure, and investment is continuous with strong all-round optimism and energy levels. This is certainly the place to be right now," Roberts adds.

A NEW GENERATION FOR REGENERATION

The government's proposal to build artificial islands for housing purposes has stirred debate recently, with many pointing out that there is plenty of undeveloped land in the New Territories. Actually, there are already plans to further develop some of the area's rural townships, and this will bring job opportunities.

In the case of Sha Tau Kok, major changes are afoot: the little-known border town has been hidden behind the veil of the Frontier Closed Area since the 1950s, but the strip of land is finally being opened up. As a side effect of its long seclusion, the tranquillity and rural character of Sha Tau Kok and its surroundings have been well preserved.

The Planning Department believes the town is suitable for developing eco-tourism and cultural tourism. It has commissioned Ove Arup & Partners to carry out a consultancy study on the enhancement of the rural township. Arup also looked at Lau Fau Shan, an oyster-farming village in Yuen Long district.

"Arup was the urban planner and urban designer for both projects," says Wilfred Lau, director of the consultancy firm. "We were responsible for formulating area improvement plans for the townships and their surrounding areas, and developing conceptual schemes and preliminary design drawings."

Job opportunities in connection with the improvement projects lie, first, in the fields of design, town planning and construction, he adds.

"Over the next 12 months, we will be looking to recruit more urban designers and urban planners," says Lau. "We are looking for people who are passionate and who want to apply their skills to develop better communities. In return, our planners and designers enjoy a rewarding career with a sense of accomplishment through shaping a better world."

The firm's study of Lau Fau Shan found that it has natural assets such as wetlands, mature mangrove communities, fishponds, habitats for egrets and migratory birds, and a scenic coastline – which has high potential for eco-tourism.

In Sha Tau Kok, Ove Arup engaged with the local community during the planning stage to identify the town's rich heritage and Hakka culture, and then formulated a set of sustainability principles.

This approach is echoed by Christine Loh, CEO of Civic Exchange and adjunct professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's environment division.

"Areas such as Sha Tau Kok and Lau Fau Shan need to be planned and designed appropriately to take care of a range of concerns from the human, environmental, functionality and economic perspectives," she says. "It is no longer sufficient to talk in terms of costing, because the desired outcomes are often design-related, not necessarily cost-related."

Loh says that urban planning offers a wealth of job opportunities at present. "As Hong Kong attempts to improve the liveability of the city, there will be many public and private projects where a wider range of talent is needed, especially multi-disciplined approaches," she says. "Hong Kong needs more local professionals, as well as tapping into the experience of people from the mainland and from overseas."

Arup's Lau is similarly positive about employment prospects in the planning field. "Over the past year, we have seen an increase in opportunities in Hong Kong and the mainland, and our team has continued to grow to meet demand." *Pete Spurrier*

From left, HKIA's Dominic Lam, Kenneth Lui and Remo Riva of P&T Group, and David Roberts of Aedas



Wilfred Lau

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