VERY HONG KONG

Interview by Hong Kong Design Center - 2007

Q: Hong Kong presents a unique mix of Eastern and Western cultures. Could you tell us about the education you received in Hong Kong when you were still a teenager? And how did that affect your development in the years ahead?

EC: When I was growing up in HK, I never thought that I would be an architect. Architecture as an artistic profession did not exist in HK at that time. I associated architecture with speculative office buildings and apartments, and that did not interest me. I loved reading comic books especially the Japanese Mangas like *Ultraman*. I went to St. Paul's Co-Ed. for elementary school and junior high school. Everyday after my classes, I came home and made drawings instead of doing my math or chemistry assignments. I also loved (and I still do) going to the movies. It was a way for me to escape the claustrophobic environment of growing up in HK. So I thought that being a film director would make a good career for me to express my imagination.

Q: When did you go to the US? We have heard that you took the initiative in asking your parents to send you to study in the US when you were in middle school. Why?

EC: When I was twelve, I came to the US with my mom for summer holidays. It made a big impression on me. The wide, open spaces in the US, especially in LA, gave me a feeling of freedom that I have never experienced before in HK. So I told my parents that I wanted to go to the US to continue my study. After "form-three" at St. Paul's (equivalent to 10th grade in the US), my parents finally agreed to let me finish my high school in the Bay Area near San Francisco.

Q: Now, please tell us how you got into Architecture?

EC: During my junior (third) year in high school, I enrolled in a summer program at Harvard called "Career Discovery". This program is intended for high school students to find out what it would be like to study and practice the various design professions, including architecture. It was in Career Discovery that I realized that practicing architecture in the US is very different than in HK: it could be less commercial and more creative. I then decided that instead of being a filmmaker, architecture could be a better profession for me. So after I finished high school, I majored in Environmental Design at UC Berkeley and eventually returned to Harvard for my Masters of Architecture degree.

Q: Did you Know Frank Gehry while you were studying architecture? Why did you decide to work for him?

EC: After I graduated from Harvard, I thought that there were three architects who I would be in interested in working for. The first architect was a former professor from Harvard and his office was in New York. I did not want to live in New York because the density and lifestyle in New York reminded me of HK. And since I have already studied with him, to work for him would not be a new experience. The second architect is someone I respect a lot, but at the time he only had a small office in the Netherlands. But I did not want to move to Europe. I wanted to stay in the US, and particularly, I wanted to live in LA, so that led me to approach Frank's office as my third option. Back then, the office

did not have the international recognition and commissions that he has today. He was still designing houses in Venice Beach, and he had just begun to work on some other medium-size institutional projects such as Loyola Law School. I did not relate to those projects too much. But Frank has always had the reputation as the *Artist-Architect*, and that fascinated me. So I moved to LA after graduation and I applied to Frank's office. Perhaps it was meant to be, he liked me in the interview and offered me an entry-level position.

Q: Please tell us something about your first architectural projects, and how did it affect the way you develop in design afterwards?

EC: When I first started working at Frank's office, it was as intimidating as it is today. The office was well known for using physical models extensively as a design tool. I was not a very good model maker, at least not in the way that the physical models were made at the time in the office using cardboards and wood blocks. I was much more comfortable with making drawings. In addition, my architectural education at Harvard was very intellectual and analytical, but Frank's office works in a very intuitive way. So it took a long time for me to adapt to the office's style of designing. I think that my first projects, such as the American Center in Paris, reflected the difficulties I had with adapting to the office, in the sense that the forms resembled a bunch of wood blocks piled on top of each other and they were not resolved in a fluid way.

I think that the turning point came with the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis. It was Frank's first museum project from the ground up. We started designing it with the usual models in cardboard and wood, but we could not come up with an architectural image that we were both satisfied with. So one afternoon, we started playing with paper which is more flexible than cardboard, and that allowed us to create shapes that are more curvilinear and dynamic. As a result, we began to imagine the building as metal because it is much easier to create the curved surfaces than with brick or concrete. And out of this process we invented the more sculptural aesthetic together

that the office has become known for.

In the last few years, we have become very interested in transparency. So we started to use plastic or vinyl sheets to make our models. As a result, we began to develop an architectural aesthetic in glass. I think it is still in an early stage of development but it is very exciting for me.

Q: You collaborated with Gehry in the design of the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which was completed in 1997. Can you take this as an example to show the way you work with Gehry together. What happens when you two disagreed on a problem? And how do you find the balance between the aesthetics and the function in your architectural design?

EC: Since our design process is very intuitive and extremely open ended, it is almost impossible to summarize in a few words. But I would say that it usually begins when Frank and I meet the client or visit the site for the first time. Because most of our projects are overseas, we usually have to travel by plane. And that gives us a lot of time to reflect on our meeting, and to share our first impression and reactions to the site and the program from the client. Based on our responses, we would formulate together the basic principles that would guide the design process. For example, for the Guggenheim in Bilbao, we decided early on that the museum should respond to the river's edge; it should include the bridge that bisects the site; it should have an entry plaza that welcomes the city; it should have a high reader that is visible from the historic center of the city; and since Bilbao is an industrial city, the architecture should embody an industrial character. Then when we return to LA, I would work with my design team to study these ideas in physical models. In the beginning of this process, the models tend to be very diagrammatic like building blocks. There is no suggestion of forms or shapes. We paint them in different colors to represent different elements of the program. Like children playing with *Lego*, we would arrange the building blocks in many different configurations to explore different spatial relationships. When we have generated enough schemes, then I would show the different ideas to Frank for his comments and

feedback. And at certain critical moments, we would also invite the client to participate in this process to incorporate their input. The whole process is very collaborative and it usually takes a long time, in some cases over a year, before we could find the organization that everybody is happy with.

Only after we arrive at that ideal functional solution that would we begin to explore the formal aspect of the architecture. Again, that is achieved with our physical models, but we make them in larger scales, with more details, and with the different materials like paper or wood blocks or plastic sheets to suggest the materials of the building. This is usually the most time consuming aspect of our process, but this is also when Frank and I have our most fulfilling discussions about aesthetics. I would try out different forms and shapes in the physical model while Frank and I would exchange our observations and debate our ideas like we were back in architecture school. It is a lot of hard work, and it takes a lot of patience to arrive at the final architectural image. But when we get there, it is very satisfying.

Since the designs in the physical models are often very complicated and sculptural, it is a big challenge to realize them as buildings. When we show the models to the contractors for the first time, they usually have a heart attack. In the past ten years or so, the office has developed a computer program called *Digital Project* (based on the French aerospace program *CATIA*) to help document and analyze the shapes that we have created. With this program, we are able to create a 3D digital model that resembles the physical model that we developed. From the digital 3D model, we would develop our technical drawings and communicate with the construction industry to build the design. In this way, the computer process compliments our design process. It has given us more freedom and better confidence to pursue and to explore the sculptural aspect of our architectural language.

I usually do not visit the construction site too often. We have a very good team who does that regularly and I only go to the site to make the key observations. But what I enjoy more is to re-visit the buildings after they are completed to

see how they are being used. When we design the buildings, we usually envision them in a certain way. But most often, the buildings tend to take on their own lives after they have been inhabited. For example, we designed the Guggenheim Bilbao for mostly abstract expressionist art. But since it's inauguration, the museum has hosted exhibitions on traditional Chinese Art, Motorcycles, and fashion like Giorgio Armani. It has been a tremendously enlightening experience to witness the versatility of the galleries. Not to mention that very often, we have made many friends in the local communities during the creation of the buildings. So going back to visit the projects from time to time is like returning home to visit old family and friends. It is very rewarding.

Q: Can you tell us if there is any specific events that has influenced your ideas in architecure?

EC: I hesitate to identify any specific event that has influenced me. But I would say that there were a few important transformative moments that have influenced our design process. The first one was visiting the Matisse Exhibition at MOMA in New York. I remember that it was in the winter of 1992 when we were in the middle of designing the Guggenheim Bilbao. We have just started to play with paper in our physical models, and Matisse showed us how his cutout shapes in paper could be applicable to our architecture. It really inspired us, and if you looked carefully at the curves in the Guggenheim Bilbao, you can see that they came from the Matisse cutouts.

Then several years later, we were invited by the Chairman of Samsung Electronics in Korea, to design a Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul. Other than the "Fish-Dance" restaurant in Kobe, Japan, Frank's office has not worked in Asia before. Frank and I wanted the museum to be different than Bilbao. So we began to look at Asian art for our inspiration, especially the ink calligraphies and landscape paintings. They have an ephemeral quality that is very distinct from Western Art. So we began to explore ways to incorporate that character in our design. Instead of thinking of the building as Matisse

cutouts, we imagined the museum as a "Mountain floating in the Clouds". Unfortunately, the Asian economic crisis in the late 90s hit Korea when we were in the midst of design and the project was cancelled. Although that particular exploration never came to fruition, it has inspired a different direction in our architectural language that eventually leads to the aesthetic of some of our more current projects, such as the Museum project we proposed for HK.

Q: How do you hold on to your own ideas when working with Frank Gehry, who has a very distinctive architectural style?

EC: I feel very honored to have had the opportunity to collaborate with Frank on the design of so many projects. Perhaps it's because we both share the same appreciation for the arts, this connection has motivated me to stay with him for over twenty years.

Having said that, I struggle with my own identity within Frank's office every day! There is no easy answer to this dilemma. When we work together on a design, it is important for me to never second-guess what Frank would do. I never think, "Let's make it look like a fish because Frank likes fish shapes," or "Let's make it curve because Frank likes curves!" That would be a disaster. I just try to find the best design solution for each project. I think that's also one of Frank's genius; he is very collaborative and he recognizes a good design when he sees one. Since both Frank and I speak the same "artistic language", we also tend to come up with similar creative responses on our own. But if one look carefully around the office, I hope that the projects I spent most of my time on would also embody the touches that are unique and personal to me. I know that is very difficult for the public to distinguish, but I know the architects in the office can perceive the difference. And I hope that someday when I become more matured as a designer, that difference would become more recognizable.

But for the time being, I am afraid to confess that I don't think that my own

work is very different from my work at Gehry Partners. And quite honestly, I am not sure if they should be different. I think that any work I do should come from within me. In order for it to be authentic, it should reflect my sensitivity whether I am working at Gehry Partners or working on my own. If the work is different just for being different sake, then it suggests that I am either schizophrenic or I am an impostor copying a style. Either way, I do not think it's very meaningful.

Q: The work at Gehry Partners is widely considered to be unconventional. How does that relfect upon your personality and life-style?

EC: I don't think that I am an unconventional person. I mean, I do not dress funny or have any tattoo. In fact, I think that I am quite conservative in my manners and my appearance. But some of my friends may say that my values are unconventional, in the sense that I am still single, and I do not own a house, and I live in a very small apartment about 35 square meters overlooking the beach. With so much flying I do for my work, I like to be grounded as a person but I do not want to be rooted. I left HK at a relatively young age to find my freedom and that is still the most important priority in my life.

When I am not working on design or architecture, I like to participate in extreme sports to push myself to the limits. Over the past 10 years or so, I have trekked to some of the highest peaks in the world, like the Himalayas, the Andes in South America, and Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa. I have also traveled to Antarctica to see the icebergs in person, and I have done scuba diving in some of the most breathtaking oceans to observe the disappearing coral reefs and the migration of sharks. These activities have given me tremendous confidence in my life, a better appreciation of our planet, and the most valuable inspirations for my work.

Q: Could you please tell me what have you been doing lately? What is your expectation for future?

EC: As an architect, I suppose it is everybody's dream to have his or her own office. I have worked in Frank's office for over twenty years now and I have not made that leap. A lot of my friends tell me that I ought to think about that in my near future. But for me, it is more important to continue to grow and to develop myself as an architect in a bigger picture than to give myself a deadline of when I must have my own office. Philip Johnson used to say that the life of an architect begins at age fifty. So I still have a little bit of time. Architecture, unlike the entertainment business or the athletes who reach their peaks in their twenties, is very much an old man's profession. It gets better with age and with experience. In that respect, perhaps the better questions are, "Am I doing better work now than one year ago? Am I a better designer now than I was last year? Am I continuing to learn and to evolve as a designer while still working at Frank's office?" And as long as the answers are "Yes", I am happy to keep doing what I have been doing. But if one day I wake up in the morning and the answers to these questions are "No", then maybe it is time for me to move on. But for the moment, I prefer not to speculate on the future. I think that *Tomorrow* is very much the result of *today*, so I would rather focus on what I am doing *now!*

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