

H o r a c e P a n

hinge - Can you tell us about your background? Where are you from?

Horace Pan - My parents were born in Indonesia. They were both Indonesian Chinese and they went to China during the 1960s because at the time, Indonesia was cracking down on ethnic Chinese residents. So my parents continued their studies in mainland China. I was born in the 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, in Beijing. My family moved to Hong Kong when I was four years old, because of the situation in China during that time. And I was brought up here.

I received my Bachelor of Arts with Honours right here at the School of Design. I was a bit of a strange case among my classmates, because I studied sciences in high school. Afterwards, I decided I'd prefer to study something more creative and needed to find a way to further my interests. I had no clue about interior design or any other design before I entered PolyU.

When I got into this programme, it was the only interior design degree programme at the time. I had to obtain a two-year design diploma first, and it was very interesting. Now that it's a university, they've phased out the diploma portion, but at the time it really opened my mind. I studied art history, fine art, sculpture, photography, ceramics, installations, it wasn't about commercial design at all. Personality speaking, it was good training, just like the Bauhaus. It was a very disciplined foundation training for people before they decide which design direction they wanted to pursue.

After my diploma, I applied to the interior design programme, where I had three years training. I graduated in 1995. I came back to further my studies by doing a masters degree here in design. There isn't any postgraduate training for interior designers in Hong Kong yet. We don't have schools that offer PhD or masters in interior design and I think there is a market here for further training and education.

Now I teach at the School of Design. You can say that I'm a total SD product! It's a great chance for me to give back some of my experience to students. I joined SD last year as an assistant professor. Last year, we saw environmental design changed back to environment and interior design. My role changed from a learner of design to a practitioner and now an educator; I feel like I've come full circle. It has been a special experience.

h - Was there a particular experience that turned you on to pursuing a career in design?

HP - When I studied physics, the whole idea behind it was something intangible. The universe must have had a big creator behind it. The world must have been designed, I thought, even though I'm not a Christian. But I knew that some people must have been creating for their career. Even in our daily lives - someone must be improving its quality. Since a designer has this job, I thought I'd like to try it out, to help improve people's way of life.

h - Where did you first practise interior design?

HP - Edge, with Gary (Chang). I worked there for two years. I learned a lot and had a very good time. At the time, the office was very small; it was Gary, Michael (Chan), another colleague and myself. That experience influenced me a lot. Some of my classmates wanted to get into a big office after graduation, where they had a stable environment and could see their path

very clearly. I thought that Edge would give me the opportunity to take care of an entire project. It was also very design-oriented, and I thought it was very important for a fresh graduate to have a chance to experiment, especially in Hong Kong.

h - Tell me about your partnership with HAK Studio.

HP - HAK was a bit of an experiment. I got together with four other partners who all had architectural backgrounds. So they took care of the architectural projects and I took care of the interior ones. However, the project distribution was very unbalanced. We also had an office in China that focused on architectural projects, which meant that I could only concentrate on Hong Kong projects. This was in 2002 and our marriage was very short - only one year.

h - But you had a very nice office!

HP - That's why I call HAK Studio an experiment. We were pretty green ourselves when it came to running a business and we needed to take care of everything. And we had too many partners with too many ideas. There were very different expectations about the development of the company. That's why we separated. And then I set up Panorama afterwards, to further my projects in China. Along with offices, I got a lot of retail, restaurants and bar projects.

h - What are your plans for Panorama?

HP - My associate and I have a lot of interesting projects now, especially in China. We're doing some clubs including one in Hangzhou, a club beside West Lake. It's an existing three-storey building that we will renovate. And then we are re-branding California Red Box Karaoke. They are a very established Hong Kong brand that is branching into China. We are doing the flagship in Guangzhou. And we are specialising in brand strategy, where we help our clients develop a corporate identity. This is one of my design approaches. I see design and business as left and right hands. Retail is part of it. In China, branding is a hot topic and this type of strategy can be applied to it. Food and beverage is another case, when we did CRCare for China Resources Retail and the Blue One Club two years ago we came up with the name to go with the space. And we designed the packaging and logo.

h - Why did you decide to become a teacher?

HP - There are two reasons. First, because there was a post open! PolyU wanted to hire someone to develop the interiors education programme. Although PolyU was the first school to offer a degree programme in interior design, now we also have IVE (Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education) and its top-up programme meets the market's demand. And PolyU accepted a lot of advice from the design industry on how to revitalize its design curriculum. Plus I wanted to share my experience.

The second reason is because my mother passed away. That was a good lesson, and had me thinking that I needed to do something more meaningful with my life. My mom died two years ago when she was still very young. In fact, she had cancer and she died quite suddenly. It was a shock to my entire family. And I felt that life's so short and since I loved the subject of design and I had a chance to do something, why not give back something to the next generation? It is a very valuable opportunity.

I always tell my students now that they need to fully understand the industry. But more importantly, they need to understand themselves. Why do they love design? It is a very demanding and exhausting profession. The programme is very difficult training for undergraduates. As our programme is environment and interior design, it isn't just about interiors within a box. Students have to think about the exterior landscape too. The SD programme is very demanding. I always warn first year students that they need to be well prepared. And when they graduate, they have only completed half of their education. The other half is when they go out to practise.

h - What needs to be changed about how design is taught in Hong Kong to foster more creative designers?

HP - This may turn into a PhD. One area is to blend interior design with commercial business. I'd like to research retail interiors and brands. When we come up with design concepts, there is a strategy behind it. To come up with a concept, you need to understand the market, the users and also the clients' needs. That is a research-based thing. For universities, I think definitely the research aspect should be strengthened.

Interiors may change very quickly. A retail shop may be renovated within a two-year cycle. So interior design is not that permanent or timeless. We were taught that design should be timeless and it may be more applicable to architecture. However, interiors can be a very strong tool for the business, if it is retail or food and beverage. I'd like to add business as an additional layer to design education. I'd like to introduce joint projects with universities in mainland China. I also would like to propose a cooperative workshop to work with the design industry, but the clients would be from China, not just from Hong Kong.

h - You mean your students will provide consultation services as part of their curriculum?

HP - Yes, and internships as well.

h - What is your current role at the HKIDA?

HP - We just had a meeting last night. I flew back from Indonesia yesterday afternoon to attend it. As we are all there on a voluntary basis, we have a lot to cover in our monthly meetings. My role is currently Vice-Chairman for local affairs, and I take care of membership, education and members' activities. Our common goal is for the interior design profession to become more professional (through the RIDA project) and well-recognised throughout the region, not just in Hong Kong (through the APIDA Awards).

We get a lot of inquiries from designers in mainland China who want to join our association, even though they are not practising in Hong Kong. For mainland Chinese designers to be part of a Hong Kong association, it is like



Founder of interior design and branding firm Panorama, Assistant Professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Design and Vice-Chairman of the Hong Kong Interior Design Association, Horace Pan now divides his time between practising, teaching and advocating good design. *hinge* catches up with this energetic 30-something to discuss his passion for travel and the rarity of good freehand sketching by students today.

a status symbol, that they are offering something different. But this difference is shrinking. I think in the future, our association may have joint affiliations with ones in China, to become stronger. Maybe in the future we will have more joint functions, so designers in Shanghai would not feel so isolated from designers in Hong Kong.

I don't consider myself a Hong Kong person, because I wasn't born here. My surname Pan is actually the Mandarin pronunciation of "Pan". But everyone here assumes "Pan" is pronounced "Fang", including the immigration department! Whenever someone calls out my name, they often say "Mr Fang, Mr Fang" and I'm sitting there oblivious since it isn't my name - I'm Mr Pan. That was why I decided to use my surname as a signature for my home Panhouse and my company Panorama. Though I live in Hong Kong, practise in Hong Kong and teach in Hong Kong, I still use an outsider's mind. I'm not that local at all.

h - If you could change something about Hong Kong, what would that be?

HP - I would change the living conditions. Most

people in Hong Kong spend a lot of money buying a tiny apartment, their so-called dream house. However, when you look at the quality of life, the environment is so congested, regardless of whether you live in a public housing estate or an expensive property development. The physical spatial provision is pretty much the same. It seems unfair that people work so hard yet have to live in such a concrete jungle. If I had the ability, I would allow each person more space.

h - What advice do you give to fresh grads about to enter the design profession?

HP - Learn culture. Study different cultures. First learn about the Chinese culture, but not in a superficial way. They should probably travel more in China. I'm not saying only to get projects in China and go there to work. If they understand that the Chinese lifestyle is changing and evolving, it would help them as designers. Hong Kong is so well situated. It's an international city, which gives them a great chance to travel around. I think travelling is a must for designers because it helps to open their eyes.

Today, everything is available online. They can find any quote they need for an essay over the Internet and it is very harmful. I'm not talking about plagiarism, I'm talking about the lack of firsthand experience. Even sketches, doing drawings by hand. Few students can do a nice drawing now by hand, compared with when I was a student. My teacher made us all do hand drawings and we studied Hindi and Mughal architecture in India for two weeks. We sat in front of the Taj Mahal from day to night, drawing different lighting conditions and atmospheres. Even though the Taj Mahal is white, we could see blues and yellows and pinks. We captured it all by hand, not with a digital camera! It is learning to draw with the brain and very good training for any design student.

h - What do you do in your spare time?

HP - Travel. I like to execute my own advice! I am planning a trip to Scandinavia next