

DESIGNING A BUSINESS

BY VIVIEN SHIAO

LAUD Architects initially took on projects that were either housing or churches, but has since expanded its repertoire to include industrial buildings, educational centres and healthcare institutions



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— Joseph Lau, managing director, LAUD Architects



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, GREEN PLASTICSOLDIERS
STYLING: J.C. GROOMING: SHARON FOW FROM LIVING BEAUTY
WARDROBE: SWEATER AND PANTS BY HUGO BOSS, JACKET (JOSEPH LAU'S OWN)

“DON’T call me *towkay*,” were some of the first words uttered by Joseph Lau, managing director of LAUD Architects, during *The SME Magazine’s* interview with him. Unassuming and mild-mannered, Mr Lau does not fit the usual stereotype of the flamboyant creative. He was also distinctly uncomfortable wearing the *towkay* label, viewing it as an anti-thesis of his leadership style.

“We are quite different from other companies because I put a lot of emphasis on teamwork. I don’t dictate or make unilateral decisions. If the *towkay* makes every decision, you just go into meetings and take notes. There’s no incentive or sense of participation.”

It is this sense of inclusivity that makes LAUD Architects stand out. Starting out with just four directors including Mr Lau in 2004, the management team has since increased to six people. Everyone has a say, and resolutions are reached together. The company has also expanded rapidly; it is 35-strong now, and plans are in place to continue its growth trajectory.

Quips Mr Lau: “When we just started, we didn’t really know what we were aiming for. But two ingredients drive us: the first is passion. The second? Creating the next masterpiece.”

GENESIS

Contrary to popular belief, the company’s name is not about winning acclaim or accolades. Nor is it a reference to Mr Lau’s surname, as he was quick to assure me. To him, the name LAUD Architects means “to praise and glorify God”, as he says that his Christian faith is central to his work.

The company certainly has quite a lot to be thankful for in the past 12 years, bagging a string of high-profile projects and awards that have firmly placed them in the big leagues. These include being award finalists at the prestigious World Architectural Festival 2016, a feat that not many have achieved.

This all seems far-removed from LAUD Architects’

early days, when the founders laboured to get it off the ground. According to Mr Lau, there was not a single cent of income in the first six months. “But we persevered, completed the projects, and that was when the fees started coming in. We struggled for the first year or two, and things only started getting better in the third year. We never looked back since,” he says.

The firm has since reached a sweet spot where it has the capabilities to take on larger projects, but yet remain small enough to attend to the details. Mr Lau believes that this serves the company well as it is able to take a “hands on” and “personalised” approach to each undertaking.

Previously, the company’s projects could be categorised into two main types – housing and churches. Over the years, LAUD Architects has expanded its repertoire to a wider spectrum including industrial buildings, educational centres and even healthcare institutions such as hospitals.

But what truly makes the firm stand out is its lack of inhibitions to take on bold, new concepts. One example would be DECKproject, a temporary photographic gallery at Prinsep Street that the company worked on *pro bono*. Even though it was not a commercial project, a lot of effort and research was poured into it as it was unfamiliar territory.

Says Mr Lau: “We take every project seriously. Even for a seemingly ordinary house or project, we always strive to create something different. Every project is different and new to us.”

The team’s dedication to their craft has paid off handsomely. In the end, their novel idea of using shipping containers as an art gallery ended up garnering nods of approval from both local and international award committees.

COMMERCIALISM VERSUS PROFESSIONALISM

Even after more than a decade at LAUD Architects, Mr Lau does not believe that a business is purely about chasing profits. “Earning money is not the only thing even though we need to survive. We have been reasonably



PHOTOS: TEN MENCJIN



THE BOSSES

From left: LAUD Architects’ Deputy Managing Director Ho Tzu Yin, Director Jason Bok, Managing Director Joseph Lau Tse Kit, Director Melvin H J Tan, Associate Architect Eugene Aw, Associate Architect Matthew Yeo

rewarded all these years through hard work and passion . . . but if you talk about making big money, this is not the profession.”

Instead, he talks about balancing the bottom line with professionalism. For example, this means forking out the time to do research and not being too cost-conscious, which could lead to the cutting of corners. He states: “Professionalism, and not commercialism, is the top of our agenda – we concentrate on improving ourselves and doing better. If we expose ourselves to new things, we will be better off.”

Mr Lau describes the role of an architect as a “peculiar” one as there are many elements involved in the job aside from design. The process starts from design, followed by the owner’s approval, and then the firm has to make the drawings come to life. It becomes a multi-disciplinary work from that stage on, and involves calling for a tender, recommending contractors and so on.

According to Mr Lau, the architect becomes the “captain” who coordinates and manages the different components to deliver the whole package. It is a combination of art, science, technology and social skills.

“Design excellence is often mistaken to mean façade design, whether the buildings look beautiful. But in planning the building, you have to understand the behaviour of the user, the context, the environment and so on,” he explains. This encompasses a whole array of factors, from the surroundings to connectivity to pedestrian movement.

While many in the industry pursue awards, fame and reputation, Mr Lau says that LAUD Architects’ fundamental task is to take care of the occupant. “When you design a house, you have to be mindful that it’s not a functional box . . . you have to improve the quality of living. That’s a basic

role of the architect which we should not forget.”

HEADING ABROAD

One area that LAUD Architects has been focusing on is venturing abroad for new business. To date, overseas revenue makes up 10-15 per cent of its portfolio, having completed projects in Myanmar, Malaysia and China.

This is the direction that the company is hoping to move further towards. At the time of *The SME Magazine’s* interview, Mr Lau shared that he just returned from a trip to Norway, as part of a business delegation organised by the Singapore Business Federation.

It was a fruitful trip, and he praised the organisers for their efforts in having “tailor made” the trip for the participants based on their requests. He managed to meet with relevant parties such as hotels, real estate developers and even fellow architects to learn and network.

“So why would a small architect want to go to Norway, such a far-away place? Given every slightest opportunity, we go for it. In life, in business, you really don’t know where the next project is coming from and how one thing will lead to another.”

He shares that it is not easy for a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) to compete on the world stage, but the government has been supportive in the company’s efforts to internationalise and has been helping to open doors overseas, be it through the various schemes or trade missions. He observes that SMEs like themselves also gain from the Singapore brand, which he says enhances their image and boosts their standing overseas.

The company is also very open to working with international firms, as both

Y RAPID EXPANSION
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PHOTOS: TEN MENCJIN

parties learn from each other and benefit. “It’s about exchanging and sharing ideas,” adds Mr Lau. “We can’t be guarded and be protective, as there won’t be any meaning in the partnership.”

SUCCESSION

Despite the number of accolades that the company receives, Mr Lau still cites vying for projects as the biggest challenge due to the level of competition around.

Not only does it have to compete with larger players and international firms, it is also increasingly seeing younger, smaller companies want a slice of the pie. While LAUD Architects is sandwiched in between, Mr Lau is optimistic that in the long term, there will be an updraft.

His current focus is on growth, and he lists building up a solid team that can work together well as one of his biggest personal achievements.

While he is still very much on top of things in the company right now, it is his hope that LAUD Architects’ legacy will carry on even after he is gone.

He raises the example of Singapore’s late founding father Lee Kuan Yew. “Not only did he build Singapore from scratch, but he also took care of both major and minor issues. He had a succession plan that carried on from generation to generation. While there’s no comparison to building a nation and a small firm, I learnt a lot from him. When I retire, I don’t wish for everyone to go their separate ways. I would like this to carry on.”

To make his point, he gives a contrasting example from sports to illustrate. According to him, football club Manchester United’s former manager Alex Ferguson led the team to one of its greatest periods under his leadership. But the problem was, he did not groom a successor. And as a result, the team fell into disarray after he left and arguably has not been the same again.

This, to Mr Lau, is a warning of what could happen if there is no future plan in place to build on the present accomplishments. “I hope that this company carries on the LAUD legacy as well as to improve. The next in line must continue this growth from generation to generation.” ■