

Joseph Lau, Ho Tzu Yin, Melvin Tan, LAUD Architects

Text by **Domenica Tan**  
Images courtesy of **LAUD Architects**



Best known for their religious buildings, LAUD Architects is a medium-sized practice with a portfolio that spans various sectors. *Domenica Tan* speaks to its directors.







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**Ho Tzu Yin**

Helmed by four directors, Joseph Lau, Melvin Tan, Ho Tzu Yin, and Jason Bok, LAUD Architects is a local practice with experience in a wide range of projects including churches, condominiums, commercial, institutional, hospitality, and industrial buildings. The team, one of the local pioneers in BIM authority submission, constantly explores new and innovative design solutions. Emphasis is placed on the appropriate and creative use of technologies, materials, space, and forms that run beyond fulfilling the client's brief, creating an architecture that engages the senses and heightens the awareness of space, yet never losing sight of basic functional requirements.

SINGAPORE ARCHITECT  
HO TZU YIN

**1**  
From left to right:  
Melvin Tan, Ho Tzu Yin,  
Jason Bok, and Joseph Lau

**2**  
ACE The Place Community  
Club, 2013: The iconic  
orange canopy acts as a  
metaphor for sheltering  
the numerous activities  
provided by the club.

**3**  
ACE The Place Community  
Club, 2013: Public spaces  
are designed to be flexible  
and encourage social  
interaction between  
the users.

MELVIN TAN

HO TZU YIN

MELVIN TAN

**Why did you take up architecture?**

I took up architecture because I have a desire to create a better environment for users of space. Architecture is all around us; we experience it daily, except that we never consciously think about it.

It's interesting because I've never really thought about architecture when I was young. When it came down to the crunch in selecting the course of study, one main criterion for me was that it had to be something with artistic input, or something which I could do with my love for drawing. After some exploration, I felt that architecture was something that I could apply some artistic input while engaging in scientific approach or study.

**What was the motivation behind setting up LAUD Architects?**

One of the rewarding things is that with your own start-up, you have better control of the direction and the type of architecture you'd like to do.

We joined hands, took a risk, and 10 years have passed. It's been a very fruitful journey, and there's a lot more to come.



#### What were your goals and vision?

HO TZU YIN When we first started out, it was of course to get the business going. After 10 years, we clarified our goals. Firstly, I will never want our company to do the same things and produce the same designs over and over again. In other words, we never want to be stagnant or intellectually lazy. We want to always challenge ourselves and push the boundaries. Secondly, I believe we learn about life through architecture. I'd like to try different types of projects. Hopefully through this, we can learn more things. Lastly, our staffs are important to us. We'd like to create an environment that nurtures the next generation of talented young architects, and attract people who are happy working here. In whatever we set ourselves to do, we strive to always do better.

MELVIN TAN The younger generation enjoys good discussions. They enjoy discussions that pique their interests and challenge them so the environment that we create would be one of the major objectives that we have in the office. With that lively environment and rigour, good work comes up.

JOSEPH LAU Another point is to let the company continue, and let the practice continue from generation to generation because we like to make this company open-ended and not just here without any continuation. Not to mention, to do better in architecture.

#### Where do you see yourselves in 10 years?

MELVIN TAN Hopefully still doing what we love. Architecture is always evolving. In 10 years, we'll still do the same thing that we love but with a greater understanding through learning from the past.

HO TZU YIN Of course, we mature as we go along and I hope we can become better architects.

#### What do you define as better architects?

HO TZU YIN As an architect matures, the type of architecture he or she creates will be more attuned to life. I know it's a very general term to say "better architecture," but that's what we strive to create.

MELVIN TAN There is always the notion that "one man's meat is another man's poison." Architectural design is very subjective but a good architect will be someone who surpasses expectations and requirements of the law. In Singapore we can't escape that; regulations are really strict and part of our goal in the office is to surpass instead of just subscribe to them. With good design, we can better these requirements.

#### What are some of your sources of inspirations?

HO TZU YIN Certainly the architecture created by fellow architects. I love to travel and I always make it a point to visit buildings by architects I love, namely Tadao Ando. I also get inspiration from books, art, and the creative process.

MELVIN TAN For me, photography, music, and other aspects or pursuits of design that I'm involved with are sources of inspiration. I think the totality of design comes from cross-collaboration and thinking.

#### What were some of the challenges you faced when you first started out?

HO TZU YIN One of the main challenges to any design architect is fulfilling the client's brief, while at the same time trying to incorporate something of ourselves and what we want inside the architecture. It's particularly challenging when we are faced with commercial projects where aspects such as the



4  
Grace Assembly of God I,  
2012: Exterior view.

5  
Grace Assembly of God I,  
2012: The design concept  
revolves around the  
deployment of the three  
sanctuaries/chapels within  
a high-density volume.





6  
Singapore Life Church:  
Main Sanctuary.

7  
Singapore Life Church, 2012:  
Contemporary design with  
seamless white aluminium  
cladding is used to create a  
monolith form.

8  
Singapore Life Church, 2012:  
Natural light permeates  
through from the exterior  
to create visual identity in  
the interior.

Gross Floor Area (GFA) or profitability comes into the picture. It's always a constant struggle—and it still is—to try to achieve a fine balance between the two—giving the clients what they want and what they seek, and produce something that we can be proud to put our names on.

MELVIN TAN I think any young firm will have the challenge of making a name for themselves, or making themselves visible, or appear credible. We were blessed to have some past projects that we had done together collectively at a previous firm and we didn't have as much of a problem, but we were also trying to establish ourselves as a design boutique firm, rather than just a commercial firm. The challenge for the last 10 years has been to establish ourselves as a firm that can be associated with good design. We did it one step at a time, doing good design one after another and trying our best.

JOSEPH LAU The next challenge would be in nurturing the next generation.

**Are there any projects that are turning points or milestones for the firm?**  
MELVIN TAN The Subordinate Courts was a key project. Singapore Life Church was another, in terms of churches, because that was one that was blessed to have "Honourable Mention" for the SIA Design Awards last year. We had three projects selected for WAF last year, so that was an encouragement to us, because out of 10, three were from us—Bible House, Bethel Assembly of God, and Singapore Life Church.

HO TZU YIN Recently, we got our first Housing & Development Board project for public housing. Hopefully, that leads to more similar projects.

**What are some important lessons you have learnt?**  
JOSEPH LAU One of the lessons would be that certain objectives in architectural design are very often compromised by the different types of criteria and objectives set by the client e.g. financial affordability etc. We find it very hard to



achieve what we'd like to achieve because it's always compromised by other goals. We have learnt lessons, but we haven't got the solutions yet.

**HO TZU YIN** Striking a balance or finding the "sweet spot" where both the interest of the client and our interest as designers overlap. When that happens, good architecture can be created. That way we don't have to constantly fight with the client or convince him to fork out more money.

**MELVIN TAN** A young architect usually has idealism and the idealism often overshadows the requirements. One of the lessons we learnt is that idealism should not be demolished but the technical requirements must surface and they must be addressed suitably. It's therefore about finding how we can meet all the requirements yet still be satisfied with the idealism in our design.

**JOSEPH LAU** The other definition of "sweet spot" is optimum design. Some young architects do have wild ideas and focus mainly on the design, but have less consideration for the practicality, functionality, and financial. This is very idealistic. To me, "sweet spot" means the optimum—striking a balance.

**What has been the best advice you have received that has helped you in your career?**

**HO TZU YIN** At the end of a crit in my final year at RMIT Melbourne, my professor scribbled on a piece of scrap paper, "Ho Tzu Yin, don't be afraid to take risks." That was the best advice I've ever had, and that has shaped me as an architect tremendously. I never really clarified with her what exactly she meant, but in my interpretation, she's asking me not to remain in the safe zone, not do the same things over and over, and always try to push the boundaries. Only if you try to push the boundaries, will you discover what you really are capable of. I've been trying to heed that advice ever since. Interestingly, if you look at our projects, none of them are actually the same and I wouldn't say there is an identity in terms of a particular way we treat façade, a particular material we use or specific aesthetics. We always try to do something new. In a sense, you can say that that's our identity but if you compare all our projects, it's hard to find a similarity. I am quite happy and proud of that because it means that we are always moving. We never reuse or rehash certain ideas. We always do what we feel is good for that particular project and location.

**MELVIN TAN** I probably can't think of one good advice that I've had, but I think collectively, whether it's been tutors, mentors, or good friends, the encouragement to continue doing architecture has pushed me for a long time. It's a tough life (laughs). It's challenging but fulfilling.

**Describe architecture in a sentence.**

**MELVIN TAN** Architecture is the order that we give to all the chaos of decisions, specifications, and regulations.

**HO TZU YIN** I don't have anything original but I offer Richard Ho's quote, "Architecture is the expression of life." I think that is very apt. Architecture are spaces where we translate our life experiences and recreate an environment for people to live in. Hopefully when people come to experience the building, they will experience an aspect or heightened awareness of their lives as the architect sees it and that is what I understand from the sentence.

**If there was one thing in the world you would change with architecture, what would it be?**

**HO TZU YIN** I haven't gone around building mass housing using paper tubes, and winning a Pritzker (laughs). What I can do in my humble attempt is that I



9  
AGAPE Hope Center, 2012:  
Exterior view.

10  
AGAPE Hope Center, 2012:  
Bird's eye view.





11  
Bethel Assembly of God,  
2012.

12  
Bethel Assembly of God,  
2012: View of the Sanctuary.

13  
Bethel Assembly of God,  
2012: Working around the  
concept of "Stairway to  
Heaven," the architects'  
intention was to anchor  
the entire architecture  
around the main staircase  
element, which is visible  
from the façade.

will try to educate the next generation of architects and hopefully multiply my knowledge by manyfold. I'd be happy if some of the architects and students do better than me as I have helped to pass down the knowledge.

MELVIN TAN I have not had the aspirations to change the world but I have aspirations to change people's lives one space at a time.

JOSEPH LAU We are ordinary people, and are not great people who invent things. But if I was given that kind of capacity, I would like to invent, if not then reinvent and improvise, like the Japanese architect who uses cardboard to build buildings; it's just so creative and innovative.

MELVIN TAN Maybe we can learn from Philippe Starck—he gets his ideas from farming oysters, or doing something totally unrelated to architecture.

**Any thoughts about the Singapore architectural scene which you think are positive or negative for a young start-up?**

MELVIN TAN Singapore, in my opinion, is a perfect place to start. I think the clients have grown in their appreciation for design so it is good ground for new start-ups and for architects who can meet the requirement.

Singapore is a cosmopolitan and open city. We get bombarded with images of good architecture around the world, be it through websites, feeds, or blogs etc., almost to a point that I would say the negative is in where we stand in our identity. I think that our identity as Singapore architects has yet to be solidified. It may be that because Singapore is so fast-paced that it is a privilege for us to go through everything slowly. I think slowness is almost non-existent in Singapore. There are many thoughts and beliefs when we talk about slowness in architecture. Architects forcing themselves to sketch rather than using CAD is now a paradigm shift in the way we do design.

**Any advice for aspiring architects?**

HO TZU YIN Take risks, be prepared to work very very hard and don't give up.

MELVIN TAN I would say, don't limit your material to just architecture. Be open to other disciplines of art because there's only so much architecture is. Don't design in a tunnel and just view one thing; be open to everything. There is a lot of power in collaboration.

**If not architecture, what would you have delved into?**

HO TZU YIN I'm a huge science fiction buff since young, and my favourite is *Star Wars*. I grew up thinking that I wanted to be a movie set designer. Unfortunately, it was all done digitally and that is not my type of thing. I like to build physical sets and environments.

MELVIN TAN No regrets in architecture; but if not architecture, probably photography. Actually most of the works (by LAUD Architects) are shot by me.

HO TZU YIN He's our in-house professional photographer (laughs).

MELVIN TAN Incidentally, my dissertation in my final year was about how photography and architecture actually co-relates. It was really my interest. My passion for photography started even before architecture, but I'm glad to say that it is a complementary interest and passion. ▀

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