

THE UNDERSTATED MASTER ROCCO YIM

by Rebecca Wong



He is arguably the biggest name in Hong Kong architecture, the only local architect to be invited to submit a masterplan for the West Kowloon Cultural District alongside international stars Sir Norman Foster and Rem Koolhaas.

He may not be instantly recognizable to most Hong Kong people, but many will have seen his work: the Hong Kong MTR station, Citibank Plaza, Lok Fu Centre II just to name a few.

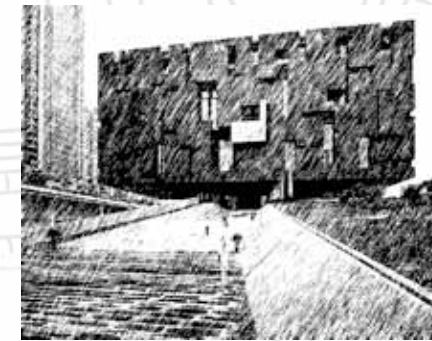
Yet in person, the softly-spoken Rocco Yim Sen-kee cuts a gentle and modest figure. With his traditional oval glasses, neat white shirt and long brown jacket, Yim has the demeanour of a scholar. He smiles frequently and often gives an embarrassed laugh when asked questions about himself.

But when the conversation turns to the topics he feels strongly about, his voice gains in volume and you can see his passion. And for Yim, architecture, its relationship to a city and its potential for social good, is a passion. He firmly believes that form follows function and he draws the inspiration for his designs from the surroundings of his sites.

As a boy, he stood out from his classmates because of his love for the visual arts. He was always drawing or designing catalogues and Christmas cards. But the people around him scared him by saying a painter could never survive. It was just as well.

"I know I am not a 'pure' artist because I cannot create something out of nothing," he says.

"The good thing about architecture is that it asks for solutions to some practical problems." These problems provide the challenges Yim likes to tackle. For instance, the flow of foot traffic at a shopping centre. In his eyes, architecture is the art and science of environmental improvement.



The 650,000 square feet Guangdong Museum is one of Rocco Yim's masterpieces. It is primarily inspired by the lacquer box, which has long served as a vessel for precious Chinese objects.

This can be seen in the Hollywood Terrace project Yim designed for the Housing Society. Within the framework of a residential development, he devised a series of public landscaped gardens, punctuating by lifts and stairs to form a pedestrian access connecting the Mid-Levels and Sheung Wan. As a result, the flow of people between the two areas was greatly improved without transportation. The project won the Hong Kong Institute of Architects Certificate of Merit in 2001.

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It is just one of the many awards Yim has won in his 35 year career. Yim set up his own practice just two years after graduating from the University of Hong Kong and first attracted international attention when he won the 1st Prize Award of the Opera de la Bastille International Competition in 1983. Later he was twice awarded the Gold Medal by ARCASIA, a group of highly professional architects in Asia.

With his firm, Rocco Design Limited, Yim has won numerous local and international competitions. The new government headquarters at the old Tamar site will showcase his ideas

about how architecture can contribute to a city.

But Yim tries not to let the accolades go to his head, "I shouldn't use these awards to affirm myself. In the past, many artists were only given recognition after death," he says, "But I can't help but feel more confident when I get recognition."

Despite the recognition, Yim insists that his career has not always been smooth. Although his design won first prize in the Opera de la Bastille competition, it was not chosen as the ultimate design.

"From then, right until 2000, we did not even have a chance to produce real cultural architecture. It was almost a 20-year [wait]."

Yet cultural architecture, without commercial constraints, is what Yim likes best. One of his favourite works is the Bamboo Pavilion, a temporary piece he produced for the Hong Kong in Berlin Festival in 2000.

Even when he is not working on cultural and public architecture, Yim tries to apply the same principles to his private practice. That is, to produce architecture that is connected to the city and improves urban spaces.

Working in Hong Kong, Yim says local architects face very different



circumstances to their overseas counterparts. The business model here restricts the number of cultural projects and the freedom of architects in Hong Kong.

He says fresh ideas are often strangled by conservative clients who dare not accept new ideas, and dictatorial developers, who arbitrarily assert their own tastes.

When faced with the dilemma of making money or acting according to conscience, Yim insists on not taking on projects which are destructive to society. Works that do not make any contribution besides earning money for clients are also avoided.

He recalls once quitting in the middle of a project because of a disagreement with the client. "We discovered that there were great discrepancies between our thoughts on the environment," says Yim. "The resultant work would seriously waste energy and electricity. So we said no to that."

"You have got to have the determination. Basically you have to insist on your principles, though it is always easier saying it than doing it...For me, I will try to stick to them," Yim says.

Yim found a way out in 2004, leaving Hong Kong for the mainland. That year, he won the international invited competition for the Museum of Guangdong. "We can draw on the strength of the mainland," he says, "but development there has not yet reached a mature stage."

As for his own architectural tastes, Yim says he is informed by a Chinese aesthetic. "My works are seldom glitzy or overdone," says Yim, "the traditional Chinese arts have never encouraged exaggeration." He adds, "The best painting is not the one which surprises people but inspires people."

"An abstract conception of art is important in Chinese art, this abstract conception is something that can be sensed in Eastern art. If this sense can be incorporated into architecture, then you can produce something of lasting value."

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Inspired by the famed Chinese handscroll painting "Qing Ming Festival

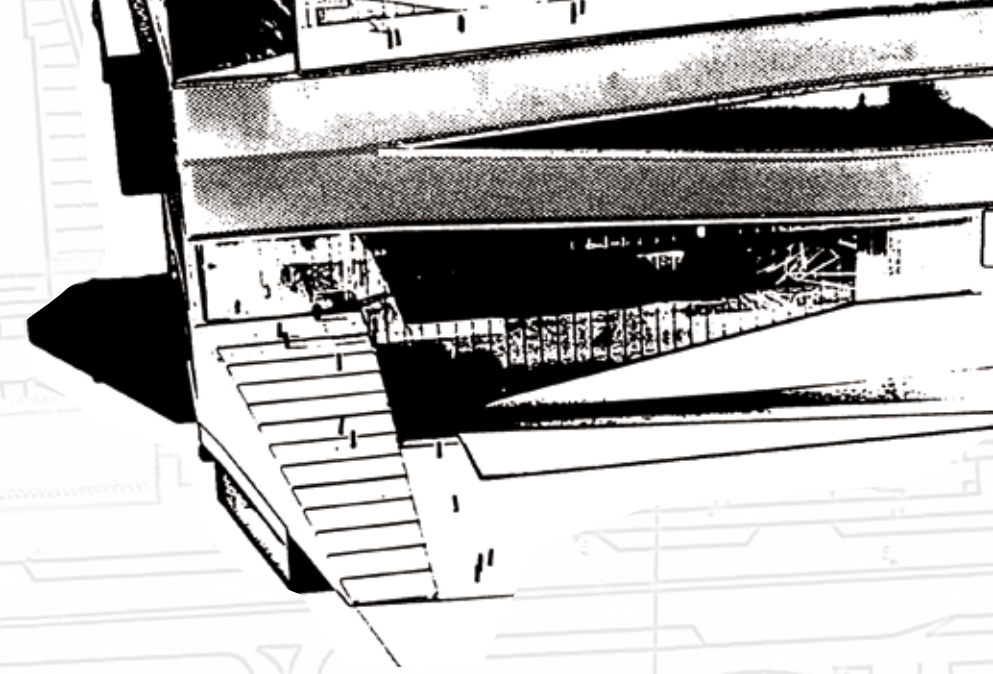
"What I said about the Chinese elements are actually a standard. They represent an appreciation and understanding of the space."

on the River", Yim designed a master plan for the West Kowloon Cultural District. According to his company's website, what strikes him in the picture "is not any 'iconic' architecture, but an energy that radiates from the people's activities."

"We are not just transplanting elements of the Chinese culture into the project. What I said about the Chinese elements are actually a standard. They represent an appreciation and understanding of the space," explains Yim about his design.

Asked how he feels about being the only local and only Chinese to make it to the final round of the West Kowloon project, Yim says he is glad he is there. He believes he has a better understanding of the urban space and the needs of local people.

Facing formidable rivals in Foster and Koolhaas, Yim is not intimidated. He knows his design's advantage – it is plain but practical.



"Pressure is definitely there, and longing as well. But this is not the first time I have ever undergone such circumstances. I am already getting used to and am familiar with this environment."

In architecture, as in life, Yim takes sincerity to be the highest virtue. "We have to be sincere," he says, "and so does architecture."

When asked if he himself is sincere, Yim smiles.

"Hopefully."

Asked to comment on his success, Yim laughs again. "The awards given to me were mainly local ones, and they are given out not so seriously...I still have a long way to go before I can reach an international standard."

Flicking the corners of some books on the table, he adds, "I shouldn't be the one to comment on that. It's for others to say."

Looking to the future, Yim hopes to show the public what good architecture is and how good architecture can improve society and improve their lives. He wants to do this through his work, particularly through public architecture.

"If they can see [those benefits] then the voices demanding better architecture will be stronger. I wish my own projects can become concrete examples."

As for how he himself is perceived, Yim just wants people to remember he is a sincere person. "Normally architects are not sincere as they have to sell ideas. I hope I will not have to be like them." ▣

