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CHRISTINA LUK



Born and raised in Hong Kong, Luk knew from an early age that she wanted to do something creative. She studied architecture at The University of Toronto and worked for B+H, one of Canada's biggest firms, upon graduation. That was followed by a stint at Neri & Hu Design and Research Office in Shanghai, where she developed a love for smaller scaled, more personal projects. She founded Luk Studio in Shanghai a few years ago to concentrate on bespoke projects within the city. To date, her portfolio includes a number of thoughtfully detailed shops and restaurants that showcase a love for materials and craftsmanship. She talks to *hinge* about the things closest to her heart: how to build a good team, her love for Shanghai's heritage architecture, and goals for her young company.

***hinge:* Growing up in Hong Kong, what sparked your interest in architecture?**
Christina Luk: After discovering my love for drawing and doodling, my mother enrolled me into drawing classes when I was probably around four years old. It was not a fancy place, and there were kids from all ages packed into a small studio. Sometimes we would even get to make porcelain dolls or paper sculptures. These few fun hours of my weekend were invaluable to my aesthetic development. I was fascinated by the idea of creating, and that led me to appreciate the beautiful designs around me.

Were there specific buildings or sites that you found inspirational in Hong Kong, from an architectural perspective?

My first home was on the 18th floor of a high-rise tower overlooking Chatham Road North that was always busy with traffic. I have vivid memories of myself tiptoeing on the sofa edge, enjoying the wind by the window, watching small cars and buses zooming by, or trying to figure out what my neighbours were doing because I could peep into their living room. When you grow up in this density, you just take it for granted. Only after I had travelled outside of Hong Kong, I realised how unique and efficient our small city is. I think the fascinating part of Hong Kong does not lie in one or two buildings; it has more to do with its diversity and its connectivity. I am still amazed how many different activities you can accomplish in one day.

When I was a kid, architecture would mean modern buildings such as the Hong Kong Coliseum, the Space Museum, Jardine House and the original Peak Tower. I liked them because they were all landmarks at that point and they could be drawn with a few geometrical shapes. Then when the HSBC headquarters by Foster and the Bank of China tower by I.M. Pei were completed, I learned about the power of architecture: how it influences the lives of people and adds value to the whole city.

I also loved taking the glass elevator at the Royal Garden Hotel in Kowloon. I haven't done it for a while but I remember having this breakthrough moment as the elevator ascended into the airy hotel atrium from the commercial podium. The experience of this sudden void was probably the first spatial surprise for me.

When you were deciding what career to pursue, did you have any mentors or people who assisted your process? Or were there any "eureka" moments when you realised that you wanted to design for a living?

For the longest time, I thought I would be a graphic designer or an animator, probably because those were the most immediate creative outlets during my childhood. Then, I spent most of my adolescent life passing school and piano exams, while playing handball for my school and making good friends for life. Basically, I didn't do much to further my art education until I left Hong Kong. I had always been quite good at math and I suppose I could have carried on my path in actuarial or engineering science, if I were not drawn to art and design. During the first three months of my art foundation course in the UK, we were immersed in different creative methods, including painting, printing, sculpting and filmmaking. It was only at that point that I realised how much I enjoyed discovering different materials, creating 3D objects and imagining how people would move through them in different scales. So I would thank my tutors at the Middlesex University; they inspired me to steer towards architecture.

Why did you study in the UK? What were some of the important lessons that you learned when you lived there?

To study abroad was a bit of a trend back then; maybe it still is. As a slightly rebellious teenager, I had always dreamt of seeing the rest of the world – or, more accurately at that point, the Western world. My dad was working in a company run by the Brits and naturally he was convinced that the British education system was the right choice. In the end, I picked and got into a boarding school with an impressive art department. Little did I know that this beautiful posh school was located in a small town with a predominantly senior population! You can imagine the shock I experienced as a teenager coming from a metropolis like Hong Kong. I was so much happier when I moved closer to London for my art foundation study year. I suppose one important realisation was how much I loved being in cities.

Although nowadays I do occasionally get away from the hustle and bustle, I am an urban dweller by nature.

Why did you not continue your studies in the UK, if you were already studying there? What drew you to the University of Toronto's programme, out of so many architecture programmes around?

The application for the UK architecture programmes started much earlier than all the other arts degrees. I remember our tutors told us about the deadline, but I really didn't think much of it at that point because I was still discovering myself. Then, after the first three months of exposure, I realised that I could study architecture – and it was too late to apply in the UK. Thanks to my parents' decision to emigrate to Canada, I had a second chance in architecture.

What was the environment like at U of T's architecture programme? What were some of the challenges and rewards of living in Toronto?

Jumping from an art college in London to U of T was another cultural shock for me. It was quite a competitive environment; I remember feeling inadequate during most of my university years. We would devote all our energies to studio projects and pulling an all-nighter was a common thing to brag about among peers. Thinking back now, I am grateful for the rigorous and comprehensive curriculum at the university. Our professors taught us to appreciate context, tectonics, details, and question superfluous ideas. It was also the time when we would draft with ink on mylar, build contour models out of millboard or basswood, and present a project in sections and models rather than renderings.

Living in Toronto, a multi-cultural city, allowed me to learn more about other ethnicities while embracing my own. Sunny summers in Ontario were glorious; I do miss outdoor sports and camping a lot. However, the long and frigid winters can be challenging. Fortunately, I enjoy skiing, so at least there was always something to look forward to.

Did your love for the outdoors come about through living in England or Canada? How do you indulge in that love now that you live in Shanghai?

No, it all started in Hong Kong. Beaches and mountains are just 20 minutes away from the hectic city centre. As soon as I learned how to swim at the age of seven, my aunt and uncle would take me to Big Wave Bay. I still remember how proud I was when I managed to swim out to the float platform for the very first time. Every summer, my dad would take us to Lantau Island where we would stay in a vacation house by the beach. The outdoors always meant good times with family or friends for me. With this seed planted, my love for nature grew much stronger when I moved to Canada. There were endless things to do in the summer under the big blue sky: camping, hiking, ultimate frisbee, or even just picking strawberries or pumpkins in the field, or barbecues at different friends' backyards. I even tried skydiving once.

Living in Shanghai, we are still discovering our options. My husband loves sailing and he drives an hour and a half to a club near the Dianshan Lake. It's heaven for our two dogs because they can be off leash and run around on the big lawn. It's very frustrating that we don't have official dog parks in the city. For a little getaway weekend, we rent a cottage with other friends in Moganshan that is about three or four hours drive away. It's refreshing to hike in the bamboo forest and enjoy some local *nonjiacai* (village cuisine). For a quick fix of urban outdoor living, we are lucky enough to have a decent terrace at home; we host barbecues and spend sunny weekends with friends during the spring and autumn.

How did you end up working at B+H?

I think in my heart, I knew that I wanted to eventually work

in Asia. However, I was not ready to leave Toronto right after graduation. When I knew that B+H was hiring, I was attracted by the fact that they have an established office in Shanghai. I thought that maybe one day I could work there. I was very lucky that this idea actually became reality.

What types of projects did you work on while at B+H in Toronto? What challenges did you face?

My first project at B+H Toronto was actually in Shanghai. It was a mixed-use complex with two towers in Pudong. Sheraton now operates the former You You hotel tower. It was my first experience of China's architectural boom. Then I spent two years working on the gallery design of the Royal Ontario Museum. It was a joint venture with Haley Sharpe Design, an international team specialising in museum and heritage exhibitions. It was quite a painstaking process because there were a lot of parties involved to determine how the artefacts should be displayed. In the end, I learned a lot about collaboration and construction administration. Then, before I relocated to the Shanghai office, I worked on quite a few design proposals, including a twin hockey arena for Upper Canada College and MaRS Discovery District in Toronto, as well as some surreal master planning for a whole city in Abu Dhabi. Although it was excellent training for effective presentation skills, I yearned for the knowledge to transform these ideas on paper into reality.

How did you end up working with Neri & Hu?

I heard about Neri & Hu from a colleague at B+H. I admired their sensibility and skills in reviving Chinese elements into contemporary design. I wanted to learn how they make such beautiful projects, so I gave it a try. When I applied in 2009, Lyndon and Rossana just landed the Zhengzhou Le Meridien Hotel, the biggest project at that point for the young boutique office. Not having much hospitality experience and coming from a rather corporate culture, I suppose they saw someone who would be comfortable managing big projects. Thanks to this experience at Neri & Hu, I learned how thorough the design process could be and gained invaluable project management skills. I have also confirmed that commercial projects can be realised with architectural rigour in China, despite what most cynics tend to believe.

What did working at B+H and Neri & Hu teach you about the business?

We will forever be driven by deadlines as designers and architects. I think the difference between business models is in what the company heads choose as priorities. Having worked at different offices and now that I am running my own studio, I've come to realise that there are simply no rules in this organic business because everything changes all the time. The truth is that those who are passionate about what they do will strive to make things work. And when there are a few people working together who love what they do, they can make magic.

What was Shanghai like when you first moved there compared to how the city is today, from a design perspective?

To be honest, there is still so much I don't know about this city. The busy core has been expanding. Every now and then, I pass by an area or a building that I have never seen before. When I first arrived here, I was fascinated about how diverse this city was, from intact-looking historic *li-long* (laneway neighbourhood) and 1930s Art Deco buildings to record-breaking skyscrapers. I also loved its urban scale that makes walking and biking such pleasant activities.

I suppose one obvious and unfortunate change has been the sprawl of shopping malls all over

the city, as most of them happen at the expense of the older urban fabric. Although in some way we benefit from Shanghai's development because more design opportunities arise, I do hope this gentrification slows down, better integrates the past and provides more public and cultural programmes. A vibrant city needs much more than shiny giant venues for mass consumption. We do have new art galleries like Power Station of Art and a few others along the West Bund, I just wish they could be more central.

Why did you make Shanghai your base, instead of returning to Canada or Hong Kong?

Life happens. I met my husband; we renovated an old apartment and called it our home. Then I managed to gather other designers and we have enough work to stay busy. I think it's more like Shanghai has chosen me. Maybe life will move me again in the future, but right now this city is an exciting hub bringing in the rest of the world.

How would you describe your creative style? Do you have a signature "look"?

This is really a question for others; I would not be the best person to answer it. My intention is to treat each project as a unique challenge, so I don't think that I have a particular style. I suppose I have developed a certain routine when I approach a project. For example, I like the idea of discovery and surprise, so I do try to create these moments to enhance a spatial experience. Lighting is the soul of a space and I spend a lot of time trying to make sure we get that right.

Do you prefer working on smaller scale interior projects rather than large buildings or sites?

No, I don't have a preference. Our studio welcomes design challenges at all scales. Having said that, I think smaller projects are great training exercises. They help prepare us for more complex projects in the future.

How important are an underlying concept and reinforcing that concept through materials in your projects?

I have learned that a concept drives everything in a project, from massing to details. With this underlying story, all the decisions can be solved easily with a basis. For example, when it came to selecting a material and colour palette for our office around a tree, we instantaneously picked white walls and light grey concrete flooring. Not so much because it provides better natural lighting, but more about increasing the chances of foliage shadows captured within the interiors.

What does craftsmanship mean to you and your projects?

An average idea executed with good craftsmanship can become a stunning project with nice details, but a great idea executed with poor craftsmanship will be a

disappointment. I think poor craftsmanship often results from a lack of communication and experience. The more we discuss with different contractors and fabricators, the more we understand how they think and how different trades fit into the puzzle, and the better result we get in the end. I believe craftsmanship is important because it differentiates the designers who care.

We often ask for mock-ups of key components such as the layered acrylic screen design in Aime Patisserie or the baking pan ceiling modules in Baker One. This process helps us realise any potential problems and we can solve them before it gets out of hand.

What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of working in Shanghai?

Pros and cons are usually two sides of the same ball. Everything can be custom made, but sometimes when you want to pick something from a standard catalog, there might not be one. The experience and capability of contractors and consultants vary, and they don't necessarily follow any standard procedures. Therefore, the resulting work has more to do with how much the designers push and how much time the client allows for the project. The whole design community in Shanghai is relatively young, so when they get to be involved in a project from the beginning until the end, within a short time frame, everyone gets excited and works very hard to finish within these unreasonably fast deadlines. Sometimes I do miss having someone senior and experienced in the office such as a specifications writer, who I can ask about any precautions on some details or the quality of a specific insulation product. In that sense, each project is an experiment. We are accumulating knowledge through our mistakes and trying not to make them again.

As you are from Hong Kong originally, do you work on projects here? Would you like to? And what types?

I would love to work on projects in Hong Kong. Since it is my hometown, I would like to wait until the right opportunity comes up. It can be a small project but it should be one where we can showcase our creativity and attention to details. I recently revisited Sham Shui Po and I can imagine how some of these rather run down, mid-rise residences or vacant pawnshops may be reborn into characteristic public venues. I would jump at rehabilitation projects like that if I get a chance.

What are your thoughts about adaptive reuse projects in Shanghai, and how can they be done better in other urban centres such as Hong Kong?

Compared to other cities in China, Shanghai has always been more receptive of new ideas and things, sometimes maybe even at the expense of all the old layers and remnants. In fact, there are many more old buildings that could have been conserved and converted into new, meaningful programmes, considering Shanghai

is almost six times the size of Hong Kong. Having said that, when there is a rehabilitation project in the works, it can happen quite fast compared to cities like Hong Kong. I believe that the government approval process is less stringent here. It might also have to do with how Shanghai has a growing awareness for green living and sustainable development.

Do you find it difficult to recruit staff in Shanghai, as there is so much going on and many jump from studio to studio? How do you nurture your team?

It was more difficult at the beginning, but once we have built a few projects and managed to get them published, we now receive applications from within and around Shanghai on a regular basis. Having said that, finding the right person for the growing team is an art that I have yet to master. I have made mistakes and probably I will experience this jumping ship phenomenon in the future.

So far, I have managed to gather a talented team who tries hard and becomes stronger every day. I believe most designers find happiness in their work if they can apply their strengths and accomplish their challenges. So my role in the perfect world would be: identify everyone's capacities, give each of them respective goals, help them discover how every task is connected and guide the whole team along. Given the stress and chaos, it's not always a fun linear path. I also have to confront my weaknesses and improve myself as it goes. However, the painstaking process is always fruitful because we create something together in the end. I intend to keep my team small because this allows much closer interaction, such as having lunch together once or twice a week. When your team tells you that they are happy, then you know you got a few things right.

What are your goals for Luk Studio?

Currently, our studio is run like a family business and everyone is helping out where they can. I hope that as we keep growing, we can form a more mature office and team structure, yet maintain our simple and cosy working atmosphere. I do hope that we get to work on public or cultural projects as well as commercial ones. It would be my dream if we get to work on architectural projects such as schools, kindergartens, galleries, theatres or maybe public housing.

What do you do to recharge and re-inspire yourself?

On a daily basis, I relax when I spend time with my two dogs and hang out with my husband. On a weekly basis, I meet up with good friends over a great meal. And every year, I travel and explore new destinations. Recently, I have discovered Vipassana meditation and I am fascinated by its power in balancing the mind and the body. I do hope I can keep up practicing this technique and continue the path of Dhamma in my life.



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