

WORLD'S BEST INTERIOR DESIGNERS SERIES  
世界顶级室内设计师系列

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大连理工大学出版社

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## Contents

6	Foreword
8	Introduction
12	A conversation between James Saywell and Steve Leung
22	Diamond Jubilee Building, Munsang College, Hong Kong
24	Hereford Road, Hong Kong
26	Coloane, Macau
28	Stanford Villa, Hong Kong
30	The Colonnade, Hong Kong
32	The Caldecott, Hong Kong
40	Symphony Bay, Hong Kong
42	Symphony Bay, Hong Kong
46	The Belcher's, Hong Kong
50	The Belcher's, Hong Kong
56	The Belcher's Club House, Hong Kong
60	Mission Hills, Shenzhen, China
66	I-chi for Maxxa
72	Casa Marina, Hong Kong
78	Chelsea Court, Hong Kong
84	The Upper East, Shanghai, China
88	Sorrento, Hong Kong



94	Cube for Maxxa	216	56 Repulse Bay Road, Hong Kong
104	Fairwood Café, Hong Kong	222	56 Repulse Bay Road, Hong Kong
110	Four Seasons Hotel (Mock Up), Hong Kong	230	56 Repulse Bay Road, Hong Kong
112	Dong Lai Shun, Royal Garden Hotel, Hong Kong	236	Novotel Citygate Hotel, Hong Kong
118	Headquarters, Hong Kong	246	Mission Hills in Residence, Shenzhen, China
124	SLD Office, Hong Kong	254	J-Residence, Hong Kong
130	Farm Road Club House, Hong Kong	258	J-Residence, Hong Kong
136	56 Repulse Bay Road, Hong Kong	264	The Mandarin Palace, Shanghai, China
144	Grosvenor Place, Hong Kong	268	The Long Beach Club House, Hong Kong
150	Grosvenor Place, Hong Kong	274	Mangrove Bay, Shenzhen, China
158	Qeelin IFC, Hong Kong	278	Lian IFC, Hong Kong
160	Qeelin Peninsula Hotel, Hong Kong	284	Beverly Hills, Hong Kong
164	Gloria Riverside, Shanghai, China	290	Inagiku at Four Seasons, Hong Kong
168	Gloria Riverside, Shanghai, China	298	Tenchi for Actus, Japan
176	MX, Hong Kong	300	Biography of Steve Leung
184	Centre Stage, Hong Kong	302	Awards
192	Mence, Hong Kong	304	Photo Credits
198	Leicht Showroom, Shanghai, China	304	Acknowledgements
200	Aqua Marine, Hong Kong		
208	Ling Long for Maxxa		

**The world for  
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The world for designers has indeed undergone vast changes during the twenty-five years or more since I graduated from university. Exciting new materials and sophisticated technologies have become readily available. Lifestyles have added on nuances. Even inter-person relations have acquired different dimensions. Has all this made the life of designers easier or more difficult?

As an optimist, I believe the former is the case, since more options are now open to us and they tend to generate greater creative opportunities. Nevertheless, I have to qualify this optimism with some caution: for me, freedom and the abuse of it often exist side by side, separated only by a fine line, and the constant tussle between the two has particular significance for people engaged in design activities.

I have no desire of promoting an ideology, for I am a practitioner rather than theoretician. I subscribe to freedom and diversity of expression, and accept that all genuine styles have their own validity. However, for me, there is always a discipline, a single-minded and universal discipline, when it comes to creating my own design. I believe that design should be uncluttered, functional and should serve the well-being of its ultimate user.

When I was a student, I found myself at the crosscurrents of modernism and post-modern classicism. Functionalism was being eroded by a lavishness more often inspired by caprice than by discipline. Amidst the underlying struggle, my own temperament steered me towards a rationalism that was essentially minimalist, and I have allowed this discipline to influence my work ever since.

Our challenge is to innovate, and what would we designers be if we stopped innovating? Yet, I firmly believe innovation should not be founded on arbitrariness: it has to be guided by conviction and principle, and I do hope I have something to share with you here.

Steve Leung  
May 2007

# Designing a Life

It would be difficult to be attached in any way to the design fields in Hong Kong—whether architecture or interior design—without knowing something about Steve Leung. He is one of those rare personalities whose 'reputation precedes them'. One might say that this is not always a good thing in design, but with Steve it is a particular reputation which precedes him, one that includes a number of adjectives. Many of those appear in the pages of this celebratory publication, and I will delay adding a few of my own for the moment. First I would like to acknowledge the occasion of this book by congratulating Steve on his 50th birthday, and his 20 years in practice (in various forms). It is no small achievement to maintain not only the quality of work but also the original energy evident in them, over such an impressive period of time.

Since it is said—and known—that 'architecture is an old person's game', it may be a good thing that Steve began playing while so young, for he was able to reach a point very early on where he gained the kind of commissions that bring true pleasure to true designers... the kind many wait whole careers for. It means that now, at his ripe middle age, he has arrived at a pinnacle of sorts. Not to say it won't be superseded someday, but that he can choose among the regions juiciest projects, as clients seek his expertise and eye for restaurants, residences, hotels, retail spaces, offices and just about anything else benefiting from great design—which is to say, everything.

One of the strongest impressions of Steve (one I am sure everyone who knows him will share) is his enthusiasm for what he does; for the big, wide world of design. In this sense, he's more like a 5-year old than a 50-year old. This undiminished joy for the act of designing things might be a large component of his success, since it is infectious. Clients, employees, students, journalists, colleagues all get caught up in it. But it wasn't the reason for bringing things this far; his talent was.

As this publication displays so convincingly, Steve's work over the years of his practice has an extraordinary range but also consistency. While there is a natural – and pleasing to peruse – maturation in the work, there is not the usual, shall we say, embarrassing early efforts, followed by reasonable middle efforts and finally, success. With Steve, success came early in terms of the growth of the firm and concurrently in terms of the quality of the work. Such is rarely the case in our profession. Arranged more or less chronologically, this book constitutes a wonderful summary of the designer's output

to date, and simultaneously a kind of guidebook to young designers. By that I do not mean a sourcebook of reproducible ideas, but rather a study of the evolution of a mode of design over time and through different programmes and sites. Monographs are unique in that way, and when one is thorough enough in span and generous enough in imagery, it is a great asset to a designer's library. Students of design (of all ages) could do much worse than study this book at length, and return to it often, to begin to understand architectural design is really a professional endeavour; an undertaking requiring lifelong commitment and sustained interest and lots of hard work and yes, also talent. Sure there are hundreds of wonderful specific ideas in these pictures, and even for those not inclined to mimicry, these will inspire other original ideas in the designing reader. Ways of using materials, of choosing materials in the first place, the role of texture, the potential of pattern, lighting conditions on vertical versus horizontal surfaces, colour tones and their effects on mood, contrasts and complements, spatial sequence and the idea of architectural promenade, the integration of artwork and personal effects, the arrangement of objects in space, even the ways to photograph space... it goes on and on. It is the principles behind these spaces and designs the reader should glean—and enjoy.

In a sense, the book can be enjoyed at different levels, as a cursory overview of one man's extraordinary body of work (so early in his career!), as a pleasurable stroll through the beauty of interior design generally, as a history of the profession in this region over the recent decades, as a serious compendium of design modes, as a record of evolving tastes... as a dictionary of taste itself. Undoubtedly, later volumes will follow, merely to keep up with the man's output.

For now, one could hardly find a better introduction to what makes design work, and subsequently, to what role design plays in our daily lives. Indeed, I think one of the overriding lessons of Steve's work and philosophy is that good and great design is not for the rich or privileged only, but for everyone. That may sound clichéd but it is quite true. Size and budget are only marginal influences on good design, particularly in interiors. Superb taste applies equally to the minute as to the grand. From that perspective, Steve's work in the residential sphere alone ought to qualify him for some kind of humanitarian award. He has long shown us that (and how) our domestic environments can be wonderful retreats of beauty, all the better to shield us from a visually cacophony.

nous world outside.

Steve may be primarily to blame for the tiny proportions of Hong Kong flats. I used to rail at local developer greed for the fact that most inhabitants of the metropolis endure domestic spatial dimensions more suited to laboratory mice. But Steve Leung has for so long made showflats so alluringly seductive that I now think I've found a new culprit. His showflat design work is so well-known that it is not hyperbolic to say that he sets virtually all standards in the genre. What is fascinating to study in this particular sub-category over the years is the range and control he brings to it. Rarely has an architect or designer had the chance to evolve and examine a singular programme type over the course of as many years and as many projects, so that it adds up almost to an in-depth experiment. What interests me, among other things, is the confluence of variety and recognition in his showflat oeuvre. Each is thoroughly individual and unique, yet each always bears a certain subtle, whispered signature of its author. I have no idea how many showflats Steve Leung Designers has completed over the years (the number is probably frightening) but I still enjoy scanning them as a collection, and anticipating new ones to come. Each time I learn something. Each time I take pleasure in the individual palette and concept, the fresh combination of textures and colours, the original inventions and finishing touches that once again, almost maddeningly well, raise the bar out of reach.

These projects manifest a kind of ideal living environment that people immediately respond to and yearn for. And unlike pipe dreams represented by ridiculous concepts or impossible budgets, this world is real and fairly possible... as long as one has impeccable taste and the eye of a master. If the quality throughout is unimpeachable, the variety one to the next is astonishing. Dark and moody once, then bright and airy the next. Whites and pale greys here, then rich woods and deep textures there. Near futuristic minimalism, immediately followed by just-short-of-over-the-top decorative. The control is key. Steve loves to tread on the sharp edge of going too far, as if toying with our perceptions of the acceptable or expected, stretching our imaginations and bending our preconceptions, but never abusing them. Every time he stops just short of too far, and turns 'risky' ideas into master strokes that instantly seem inevitable. This gives the spaces their ultimate persuasiveness (and a dose of their 'why didn't I think of that' annoyance to other designers?)

There's little doubt that Steve's design staff deserve credit for helping to so expertly realize his vision. But from conceptual idea sketch through the installation of the last candle, the showflats are, to one, superb examples of variations on a set of themes. Together, as I say, they justify a separate in-depth examination.

Steve has long enjoyed collaboration, and lately has undertaken projects with a handful of Asia's top designers, some in other fields. This surely is a result of his simpatico personality. But a group of recent projects for non-residential work such as restaurants, hospitality design, spas and the like, has further stretched his canvas, allowing the exploration of new materials, colour schemes, conceptual strategies, even branding exercises, that have yielded enthralling results. Steve's work with Alan Chan in the revolutionary makeovers of two Asian super brands in the fast food genre are cases in point. Both the new Fairwood Café and MX's immediately blasted to smithereens the heretofore unquestioned principle that fast food environments must look worse than the food tasted. These two finally questioned why lighting had to be hospital bright and evenly spread, why colours had to be absent or horrendous, why furniture had to look as cheap as the entrées and why artwork couldn't accompany our mealtimes. Chan's work on the graphic design and branding aspects, and their excellent integration with the architecture of the spaces re-aligned our understanding of both, and somehow the spaces became welcoming, warm, dare we say it, sexy. Even the food seemed to taste better. For transforming lunch on the run from a dreaded chore into an anticipated pleasure, Steve and Alan deserve some sort of quality of life award.

Steve's current increasing emphasis on hospitality design, most recently displayed at the Novotel Citygate hotel at Tung Chung, furthers quite logically his expertise in creating spaces the people want to be in, want to stay in. If hotels in our time are the epitome of capsulized domestic perfection—the world we'd like to inhabit all the time, if only we could afford the facilities and staff at home, it seems to me inevitable that the hotel industry would sooner or later find Steve Leung. For who else so accurately knows how we wish to live, how we crave at some level, to be surrounded by comfortable beauty... how it elevates, for want of a more original term, our sense of well-being? Someone who has tapped into the strong instincts people have to create individual environments of aesthetic grace, surely is the man to

create temporary ones for people on the road.

Furniture too, was a natural branch of Steve's interests. I've never asked him if he first began designing furniture because he got tired of specifying the stuff, or whether his boundless imagination simply forced another outlet, but his lines for the high-end Asian brand Maxxa simply put into tangible form the same principles he has evolved in his interior design work: original concepts expressed through beautiful materials and colours, interesting and pleasing proportions, a pinch of whimsy, a knowing reference to history, and most of all, that magical talent of controlling all the other bits so that they work in harmony. Take it from me, it's not as easy as it seems to create an original design for a chair, and then make it practical, affordable and desirably lovely. But perhaps what I enjoy most about Steve's furniture is that he never takes it too seriously. You can make a beautiful coffee table or bed, but at the end of the day, it's not a cure for cancer... it's furniture. Even Steve's own catalogues reveal he doesn't forget this, their wit makes it fun, even as you're admiring the designs.

I suppose wit in any category of design is a plus. It's often that final little dollop that raises a work above all others. A tiny reminder that all this can actually be fun. And this is an important point, after all, in a field that too frequently takes itself just a bit too seriously. Design is fun, or at least should be. That is not at the expense of quality or meaning or beauty. When I taught architecture I used to occasionally feel compelled to remind my students of something many practitioners seem to have forgotten: that if they weren't able to enjoy designing—to have genuine fun doing it—their work would reveal it and suffer. When you marry extraordinary ability guided by keen intelligence to a sense of joy, it can be an explosive combination, and one full of joy that is visible in the results. Steve Leung definitely has fun. Not every day of course, and not always at an explicit, shallow level, but deep down and all along, he loves what he's up to. The work shows it, the man shows it. And frankly, it's great fun watching him do it all.

**James Saywell**  
Editor



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decade...**

On 50



## A conversation between James Saywell and Steve Leung

### James Saywell: First tell me: why this book, and why now?

Steve Leung: The title is "50, 20, and 10"... you have to know what these numbers mean. I'm turning 50 this year, which to me is very important. I have long had a habit of doing something new at the turn of each decade... If you look back over my history, I created something really important for myself at the age of 30, 40 and I definitely will do the same for 50 as well. That's a milestone of my time. I have a lot of plans for my career and my company. One of them is to publish a book as a full collection of my work for the last 20 years. In the past, I've published a few books covering residential projects, or showflats... small segments of my career. Now, I really want a full collection of my work including architecture, interiors and furniture. These three areas have all been passions of mine...

I really want to continue doing architectural design, although I spend only 15% of my time on architecture, since most of my energy goes toward interiors. I still want to continue designing furniture. I have designed three collections for Maxxa. I have also collaborated with a Japanese company called Actus, which wanted me to design a line tailor-made for the Japanese market. This line will be launched next month in Japan. Perhaps I'll go into product design. Previous books have not covered my restaurant projects, hotels, offices and other types of projects, so I'd like to publicise the fact that I do many different sorts of projects.

I have also been determined to enter hospitality design, so I have actively pursued that in the last few years. I am now doing a few hospitality projects. I'd like to continue diversifying. In fact, in the office we have two main teams: the normal building type and hospitality. They are both parallel, equally distributed and equally important to me.

The '20' in the title refers to twenty years ago—1987 when I first established my own practice. I was thirty years old. At that time it was called CDU Architects and Planners... It actually stood for City Designers' Union. That practice lasted for three years. In 1990 the company merged with another company which belonged to one of my colleagues in the university, Thomas Chow. We agreed to merge and become Leung & Chow Architects. This practice lasted for seven years until 1997, when we amicably split up. Thomas set up his own firm and I set up Steve Leung Architects Ltd. and Steve Leung Designers Ltd. Now it's been another ten years.

### James: Steve, do you think designers are born or are they 'made'?

SL: I'd say that 70% is innate.

### James: So one has to have something inside, the raw ingredients... what is it, potential, ambition, vision?

SL: I think it's an appreciation for beauty. A sense of colours, proportions, materials matching... You can't train a person that has only 30% of this in-born sense or even less and then turn him or her into a master. I believe this.

### James: Then the role of education is really to draw out or guide what is already in a person?

SL: Yes, and to give that person more exposure to do more things and absorb more things. But to be frank I don't think the university curriculum has given me a lot of help in developing my creativity. However, it has assisted with management and technical aspects. It's difficult to teach somebody how to design—I don't think you can. Lecturers can provide guidelines but cannot give students a formula.

### James: Is creativity the most essential thing for an architect or interior designer? Can a professional really be successful in the long run without that special sense of creativity?

SL: I'd say that creativity is the most important aspect for a firm or a person to grow. However, if you look at it from a company basis I think that creativity is definitely not the only element needed. In order to run a good firm one needs common sense, marketing sense and management skills. It depends on what kind of company you are running. If you're looking at running a firm of five to ten people then management isn't a big issue because you can handle it yourself. But, now I have an office of about 160 people... and this number could expand. Apart from creativity, one needs management skills, a vision for planning and good marketing sense. I changed my mind two years ago—at that time I wanted to maintain a firm size of about 80 people... not more than 100.

### James: What changed your thinking?

SL: I thought I'd lose control if I had a firm larger than 100 people. I feared that I'd lose control especially in the design aspect. Then, recently I had a breakthrough. I tried to study the design industry on a global basis. For instance, look at firms in the US... some have staff reaching over 400. Some have 10 or 12 offices all around the world but they still maintain a very high standard of quality. And I thought, if Hirsch Bedner can do it, Steve Leung can do it. Because they have already demonstrated that design corporations can exist successfully this means that design business is not limited to a certain optimal size. It's all about corporate climbing... management, administration. I can see a lot of potential in front of me especially with China's rapidly expanding market. It has proven this in the last ten years and will continue in the next ten and maybe even 20 years. So long as we can prove ourselves to be capable we won't have any problems in going further. Americans can do it and I'd like to prove that the Chinese can do that as well.

I watch the Oscars and see Lee Ang get on stage to receive the Best Director Award. I'm proud of him as a Chinese person... so if Lee Ang and Vivienne Tam can do it in the fashion world or even Dennis Chan—a friend of mine looking at opening a boutique in Paris very soon, why not me?. It's always been my aspiration to bring Asian, Chinese design into the international market. I'd really like to take up that challenge. I'm trying to prove to myself, to some of my fellow designers in China, and to the world that we can do the same. We have Rocco Yim from China who are doing well in architecture. I can't think of one interior designer with equal status. So I'm setting for myself a really big challenge.

There are two ways of achieving this recognition. One is to choose to become big rather than staying small and doing good and important projects. When I made this decision I already had a staff of 80... you can't go back and revert to a small studio. The other thing



is that I have analysed the market situation in China. At the moment, China is growing so fast—especially in hospitality design. In every city there are at least two to three 5-star hotels opening and perhaps another three to five being renovated. Also, secondary cities are coming up. In three to five years you can expect to see more 5-6 Star hotels in Huangzhou, in Xian. I have also analysed my strengths in terms of my company. Firstly, we are a Hong Kong-based company—most of our designers are based and trained in Hong Kong. They speak English, Mandarin and Cantonese. We have three offices in China – Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou—meaning we have a good network in the mainland. Compared with other American companies we are geographically more advantageous. In fact, we are in a better position, more international than both our Chinese and American counterparts. Secondly, we are built from an architectural background. This is beneficial when doing projects like hotels, which are very complex. You need to work with architects, structural engineers, building service engineers, lighting consultants, quantity surveyors... and not every firm can have that ability. And you need a large firm to do 5-Star hotels. In fact, Hirsch Bedner is our model... our goal.

**James: Would you seek work far away, out of Asia, in the West, the US etc?**

SL: Actually, I've had a few inquiries to do restaurants in London and Brighton. I have a possible client in Malaysia. Actus would like me to design a shop for them in Japan. Another Japanese developer has approached me about doing some projects in Tokyo as well. I have done one project in Seoul, Korea and in the Philippines. I also have inquiries from India and the Middle East. At the moment, I haven't finished a lot of projects outside of Hong Kong and China. Unless the project is really special otherwise it's not worth it to do it. I don't mind losing a bit of money to ensure the quality doesn't suffer, but I'd rather pick my projects carefully and come out with a good result. I'm not anxious about doing projects beyond China as I don't have offices in Europe, the United States or elsewhere. At the moment I want to reserve my resources for projects in this region.

**James: The incredible growth of your company in such a short period of time indicates that you have an enjoyment or natural ability for management... (unless there's a secret partner lurking in the back that's really good at it). As you said earlier, managing a company is as much a part of it as being creative. Have you always been a natural leader on a personal level or is it some other skill that allows you to do this so smoothly?**

SL: To be frank, I do consider myself a natural leader. I used to participate in a lot of extra-curricular activities when I was in school. I was the Student Union's Chairman, sports captain... I'd always nominate myself as leader when I joined an organisation. In running my company I spend at least 50% of my time running the office. Another 50% goes to design control. Next year I'm planning on recruiting more members to my office. Some may be at a very senior level to help with managing my office and to develop my business in other sectors. Early next year I'll be announcing that Steve Leung Designers will be restructured to a more professional, corporate way of managing the company. I have three major tasks. One is to supervise design, initiate guidelines, revise and review designs by my staff. Secondly, I do a lot of internal administration. Lastly, I spend a third of my time giving presentations and meeting with clients. And now I'm getting more projects and I have to think how I can do

more. I don't think I can delegate design tasks. I've tried to delegate some design projects with simple guidelines but it didn't turn out very well. I still need to supervise design, which is the most important aspect relating to the growth of the company. I can probably delegate internal administration. I might be able to delegate 50% of my meetings with clients. I'm trying to tell my clients 'Don't expect to see Steve in the presentation stage' as there's no point—as long as the design is good.

I hope in the next ten years I'll spend more time in the office—to design, speak with my colleagues, travel. I want to train my clients to accept this. I'm sure Michael Bedner (of Hirsch Bedner) doesn't attend every single presentation—instead he sends a director. I know that personally I'm good at design but I may not be the best person to do the presentation—I'm sure there are others who could do a better job. Even interviews—I shouldn't have to attend every one... unless it's something really personal. I need some time to travel and not worry about the office. Design is the most important component but I've actually spent more time doing management in the last ten years. I want to continue directing the overall development of the company. I need someone to implement my directions but I will set the navigation.

**James: Some people are terrible at running a company. They could be geniuses but they hate the administrative part. I have a feeling, perhaps proven by the success of your company, that you don't actually hate the administrative part—what you might hate is the time it takes away from your other things.**

SL: Actually, I love it... I love setting directions and planning ahead but I hate the mundane procedures in doing all the small things. I want to do it on a macro basis. Every ten years I have a big plan. This plan is not only made one year before that... it's actually an accumulation of ten years.

**James: Are you the type of person that when you hit a stumbling block because something doesn't turn out quite as you envisioned it, you dwell on it because it really bothers you, or the type that just moves on?**

SL: Firstly, that doesn't happen very often. Maybe I've been fortunate. Maybe it's because I always have a plan. For example, if I decide to drive to Sai Kung and I've never been there before, I consult a map and seek advice from people before getting in the car. I can get there fairly easily. I'm not the type to just get in my car, cross the Harbour Tunnel and see where I end up. Instead, I'm the type to plan my route first. My chances of encountering such problems are less. Secondly, I know myself very well with regard to my limitations. I try not to set unrealistic goals. Many people who run into these kinds of problems don't know themselves. Many people try to do something beyond their capabilities. Maybe someone is good at something and bad at others... but he or she would rather not accept this. Instead, one tries to prove that he or she is good at everything. I only do things that I'm confident in accomplishing.

**James: Was this true in the early years of your practise as well? Did you already have a sense of what you could succeed in and avoid things that would be a waste of time, or did you learn this over 20-30 years of practice?**

SL: I remember having this frame of reference since I was pretty small. For example, in secondary school I already knew I wanted to be an architect. I knew that I wanted to go to the University of Hong Kong. That determination started at the age of 15. I knew what architecture was and I knew my strengths... sketching, drawing, visualising... because I did well in art. I also have an uncle who's an architect so I knew what the work entailed. When we chose our subjects in secondary school we needed to think ahead to university and our further studies. I found out that for architecture it was very simple—you just need to pass. I didn't need specific subjects. So I chose to take two mathematics classes and physics. I didn't want to do biology because I don't like messy things... and I didn't like chemistry because of the smells. I could see many students prepping for medical school and spending all their time in the lab. I actually had a lot of free time. But, the only faculty that I could be accepted in was architecture... I had no second choice! I put everything into it. I knew I could do it.

**James: How do you define good design?**

SL: Good design can mean different things to me in different contexts. First of all, good design is something that is original... that's creative, that's never been done before. But you can't just create something for the sake of being different... it has to answer a lot of questions as well. It must also be functional and practical. It's not like doing a painting or sculpture—it has to interact with human beings. It must have a certain level of functionality. If you paint something you don't need to explain it to everybody—whether you understand it or not is fine... whether you like it or not it doesn't matter—it's the artist's impression. But for furniture or interior design it must answer to certain parameters. The second part of good design, which I value as being more important, is design that serves a purpose. For instance, if it's a restaurant, then it needs to attract people. If it's a new residential project then it needs to be comfortable for people to live in. If it's a showflat then it needs to be attractive to allow developers to sell the property easily and at a high price. It's very commercial but I think I'm now spending 95% of my time doing this kind of good design.

**James: Your firm has done a real variety of projects and I'm sure your book will show this. I think you're interested in creating beauty. No matter what style or programme, you're able to create beautiful spaces. Do you think that beauty is one of the ingredients necessary to good or great design?**

SL: Definitely. But, it all depends on what the definition of beauty is. Beauty can be different for different people. Sometimes I like things that are pure and minimal. Other times I like the exotic. I'm a person that leads a simple life, I like things that are simple, proportionate, not complicated. However, if I go to a ball I dress up... I don't wear jeans. It all depends on occasions. If I go to a restaurant for dinner sometimes I'll choose a place that is simple and quiet. Once in a while I'll want to go to a bar for a drink and to relax, and I don't want to go to a bar that is minimal. I like change and variety. In terms of beauty, it's difficult to define. Normally, I like the colours black, grey, white and beige. Every now and then though, I'll wear a red shirt.

**James: This book is set on an anniversary. It's marking a milestone in your life. Many people who reach these moments in their life find themselves looking back. I get the**

**sense that you, by character, are always looking forward. Even at this occasion, which marks all you've done until now you're very excited about the future. Is this really your personality—not being one to look back, but rather preferring to look towards what's coming next?**

SL: I think so. I'm looking forward to realising my future and the plans I've set. I'm not a history buff... I seldom take pictures of my daily life. I only take pictures for PR purposes. I'm not a collector. I'm always thinking there will be a better future.

Last time I went to Chicago I spent about a week there. I did a lot of thinking. As I said, I seldom go to the US... first of all it's really far away and secondly I don't like American food. It's too big for me! I visit Europe at least once or twice a year. Prior to my last trip to the US I hadn't been there for ten years. This time, I changed my opinion of Americans. I can see that they are very good corporate climbers... not like the Europeans, who tend to think very small and have a long history. The Americans have big visions and run businesses in a very scientific and professional way.

**James: I think this originates from the American psyche... a 'can-do' mentality. You can come from nothing and become president. You can do anything you want, you can be the biggest company. I think the Europeans and Asians think more humbly, while Americans think 'why not, why can't I be the biggest?' It affects all levels of society. There's a freedom of thought, of ambition.**

SL: So, I think we should actually learn different things from different people. We can learn something from the Americans.

**James: Do you think having a strong ego is important for success, in any profession—or can someone be humble and modest? There's always a strong relation between strong egos and success... is it important?**

SL: I think it's very important to have a very definite goal or ego in doing something. I think the Chinese way of thinking—being very humble—is good in a way but bad because it keeps people very conservative. I'm the kind of guy that has the guts to do what I want. I don't care too much about what people think. I just go in my own direction. It has been true throughout my last 40 years. In secondary school and university I had half of my professors love me and the other half hate me. I was an extreme student... in fact I wasn't a very good student. I could produce good results but not in the traditional way. I talked a lot in class, but I could hear and understand. In the architecture programme many students stayed in the studio and worked long hours receiving criticism from professors. I spent one third of my time in university—some of my professors never saw me in the studio. I spent one third of my time in the sports centre. Even during the critique session I was absent. Some of my professors were very unhappy about this and blacklisted me. Another one third of my time was spent working part-time or studying. I studied French for five years. I could only spare one third of my time on school. But, I'm really fast—I had to be, and I trained myself.

**James: I know you're comfortable with success. What about fame?**

SL: I love it and I hate it. When I restructured my company in 1987 I made some major decisions. I wanted to keep 'planning' in my company name because I am a qualified planner. But, I split my company into two: Steve Leung Designers and Steve Leung Architects because I knew I wouldn't do any more planning. This was to publicise that I not only did architecture but I was also keen about interiors and other types of design. I was determined to develop the design part of my career.

My second decision at that time was to employ a public relations firm. I think this is very seldom done in Hong Kong—the same one now. I retained their services to publish my work and maintain connections with the media. This was revolutionary for me. I knew that in order to be more successful in a short period of time I needed some assistance in the PR industry. It proved to be successful. Now I have a Communications Department. I think this kind of set-up is quite untraditional, especially in British firms. The British were always very traditional. Americans are not, rather they are entrepreneurs... This wasn't an easy decision because I had to decide whether to be more public or not. This would mean being famous, where people know my name, and sacrificing certain things. If I could, I'd still prefer to be invisible, so I could enjoy life more, but my career needed it. I want to create Steve Leung as a brand, not as a figure. I'd like there to be a CEO who represents Steve Leung... someone who is recognised as a spokesperson for the company and for me.

**James: Some people might say if you weren't seeking personal fame, you could put 'XYZ' for a firm name, or that you chose 'Steve Leung' as a brand name because of ego. But you're trying to create a company using your design vision, detached from the person, to produce strong work and to grow.**

SL: To start with—it's the easiest way to start a company with someone's name. It's easier to be attached to a person... but after a while once the corporation becomes a big firm you don't need to be represented by a person. But, for a professional firm I think it's always nice to be attached to a person.

**James: If you wanted to inspire your staff and summarize for them what's most important to your company, what would you say?**

SL: I think we have management meetings every three or four months. After that I have smaller meetings with the groups of designers. I always talk about quality control and teamwork because I think the game we're playing now is very different from two years ago. If we were playing soccer, we'd be the champion for the second division but now we're moving up to a bigger league... like the 'British Premiere League'... if we do well then we may be invited into the European Championship and may even get the chance to play at the World Cup. So, we have to gear ourselves to the bigger scale games. You may be very good in Division B... the top player. Our company is moving very fast, but we always need to improve ourselves, otherwise we'll be left behind. I want each person to move faster... I don't want to leave anyone behind, but the bus is going so smoothly without any speed limit.

Right now I'm probably one of the best showflat designers—and many clients from China and Hong Kong ask me to do their showflats. I have the opportunity of refusing jobs. I must also make sure that in five or ten years' time this will still be true—not because we're deteriorating but rather that others can do an equally good job. There's very little room for improvement. There are so many competitors. Even though we're very strong the market share is very narrow. Also, clients have changing tastes. That's why I don't think it's wise for us to just concentrate on showflats for the next five or ten years. We need to diversify. That's why I've chosen to go into hospitality because it's the most complicated and challenging category of the project types. There are no competitors—they are all American firms, there are no local firms in this category.

**James: You're very analytical, but then you're also very creative—the two don't often go together.**

SL: My mother didn't pressure me into any direction. She gave me a lot of freedom. She didn't even make me go to school. I have two mentalities... one that is very analytical and plans ahead and the other that is creative. In terms of creativity, I can't create something from nothing. I'm a rationalist... I always start my projects from fact and analysis. That's why I'm not a good painter or sculptor. I can draw quite well but not in the abstract way. I can't do Frank Gehry's work—put it that way. The closest I could see myself as is Corbusier. I'm not that kind of creative mind... that's why you seldom see curved lines in my work.

**James: With your staff, do you have to push them to go wilder, or are they always going wilder and you're trying to pull them in.**

SL: I'm always trying to be open-minded and let them try things. I think I want to ensure that people see Steve Leung's work as consistent, good or bad. I like to remain within a spectrum. Interior design is not only technical... we're almost like fashion designers now. We don't receive inspiration from trade shows but rather from fashion shows and other things. I always look at interior design this way. It's like Armani—there's now a bar, a flower shop, furniture. You see, if you are a small firm it's very difficult. You need to have the fame and the size. If your firm is large you can probably complete about ten projects a year—if your firm is small then you can only do one project every three years.

I also took the fast track... had I stayed in architecture it would've taken me a long time to prove myself. If I prove myself to be good at interior design projects then I may have the chance to do good architectural projects at the age of 50 or 55. There are many ways to get to a destination.



**Steve not only  
demonstrates true  
professionalism and  
expertise in the field  
of architecture and  
interior design...**

Catherine Kwai  
Managing Director  
Kwai Fung Hin Art Gallery