

Designer Instincts

by Anton D. Javier



Vietnam-based architect Andrew Currie knows a thing or two about the changing face of design and uses this to the advantage of his adopted home.

Perhaps it was Andrew Currie's experience as a "life-long expat" that allowed him to become the multifaceted architect and designer he is today. Born in Australia, the 43-year-old Currie was raised in Singapore in the 1970s, lived in Indonesia in the 1990s and worked extensively throughout the rest of Asia in the years after that.

In his early days, Currie trained under the watchful eye of Australia's leading modernist architect, Harry Seidler. "Under Seidler, I learned that it was implicit that the architect become the master of all aspects of design and be responsible for understanding, appreciating and designing every element of space – both interior and exterior," he says.

Once he started practising, Currie soon became fascinated by the complex nature of his clients and their cultural differences and idiosyncrasies. It was then that he decided to make the move back to Asia to live in Jakarta, Indonesia during its development boom in the mid-90s. It was also there where he first met current business partner Kate Anderson.

In 1999, Currie found himself returning to Australia to work for DEGW Asia-Pacific, a leading workplace and design consultancy. There, he focussed on implementing new workplace strategies for corporate clients throughout Southeast Asia. "I found such work inspiring as I had to determine and refine the client's requirements and translate them into design briefs and solutions," says Currie.

These projects made Currie realise that his heart belonged in Asia, and he made the big leap to Vietnam in 2003, where Anderson had already been living for four years. This move enabled them to open their own architecture studio, OUT-2 Design, allowing them to share their creativity with a country that was slowly opening up to the wonders of great design.

What is the next step for Vietnam's design world?

Vietnam is evolving in almost every imaginable field. The country continues to open up and more people are travelling overseas, exposing themselves to design and all its facets. When we started our business here six years ago, we were a bit of a "modernist-misfit," as the appetite for innovative, tropical architecture and design had yet to blossom. Owning our business allowed us to stand by our beliefs and designs, and we eventually found compatible clients. Today, things have changed and young, local designers are experimenting more.

Two areas that I feel need more attention are quality and sustainability. The ability to do great, sustainable work is constrained for the most part by the current quality of construction and finishing.

What kind of influence are you bringing forth to the development of design in Vietnam?

As professionals and foreigners, we have an obligation to make a positive contribution to our chosen locale, wherever that may be. In a developing country, our influence and potential impact are amplified, as is the responsibility we bear. I want to be proud of everything we do – individually and as a company. I also want our staff to learn, develop and make their own contribution to the development of the country, either through design or whatever field they choose.

How would you describe your design process?

I can sum it up in four words: Rigorous, enquiring, understanding and intuitive.

What are your inspirations?

People are a constant source of inspiration for me. From our clients to the many people involved through our briefing process, even my friends, colleagues and family. Context and culture also influence every project. They need to be seen as enablers rather than constraints, to enhance the design rather than hinder it.

How do you feel about working in a foreign country?

Working in a foreign place is rarely easy, but most often very fulfilling. Once you get used to it, it is very hard to face the limitations that a developed country throws at you such as order and rules, among others.

Foreign places are my comfort zone, but Australia will always be "the homeland." My best and oldest friends are spread all over the globe, so physical distance has never been a barrier for me. I would like to make more time to see my family in Australia, though.

If you were not an architect or designer, what career would you pursue instead?

I'd still be a designer! I tried giving it up for a while, but I just kept coming back to it. Photography is another passion, but I prefer it as a creative release rather than a career.