



SAFEGUARDING A LEGACY

INSPIRE INNOVATE INVEST INDULGE

WHEN PHILIP CHEN FIRST JOINED WONG TUNG & PARTNERS ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO, IT WAS A DREAM MOVE FOR HIM. NOW, AS THE COMPANY'S DEPUTY MANAGING DIRECTOR, HE IS HELPING TO INSPIRE HONG KONG'S NEXT GENERATION OF ARCHITECTS.



There may be thousands of books written on the topic of leadership, but don't expect to find any of them on the bedside table of Philip Chen, Deputy Managing Director at Hong Kong-based architecture firm Wong Tung & Partners. He prefers to instead draw inspiration from the leaders he has personally worked with.

"I'm sure there are plenty of books on leadership on the shelves but I don't have time to read all of them, I would rather read something else," he tells *The CEO Magazine* mischievously.

"Instead, the clues come from the people who used to lead me. Every now and then, I think back to the earlier days of my career and what the leaders were like: what are the good things that I want to learn from them and what are the things that I don't?"



"We're not trying to lead a uniform team. We've got to let people develop – it's an interesting thing to witness."

The leadership advice handed out through such books would be difficult to apply to such a complex field as architecture, according to Chen, who leads a firm with around 250 architects, plus support, each with their individual backgrounds, quirks and expertise.

"We are a very unique profession," he stresses. "If our architects see something good in us, they will be inspired. Or if they see something they don't like, they'll do exactly the opposite. That's my idea of leadership in an architect's firm."

For Chen and the other members of his team, it's important not to think about leadership every day.

"We're not trying to lead a country and we're not trying to lead an economy. We're not trying to lead a uniform team. We've got to let people develop – it's an interesting thing to witness. What we strive to do is to create an environment to let them blossom," he reflects.

"Leadership in a place like this may be a little bit different from elsewhere. That's how I see it at least."

IMMENSE APPEAL

When Chen first joined Wong Tung & Partners, his second job in Hong Kong after returning to his birthplace in the 1990s, he saw the company's leaders as "gods". He recalls, "Our company portfolio was already very impressive – quite a few places that were familiar to me turned out to be designed by this firm. I was so proud to work here."

Projects included Mei Foo Sun Chuen and Taikoo Shing – both such significant developments that they have dedicated Mass Transit Railway stations bearing their names.

"Mei Foo Sun Chuen was a huge project. We took an old oil storage site and built 99 residential blocks," he explains. "It's not the number that was amazing. It was that we built a whole community from nothing."

Meanwhile, Taikoo Shing is now where Wong Tung & Partners is based. "We are one of those firms that works in the building that we designed so we cannot complain about it," Chen quips.

Since then, the company has added a broad range of important buildings to its portfolio, and its achievements have been recognized with a number of awards. This year, several Wong Tung & Partners projects have won awards at the Global Future Design Awards, World Design Awards, Build4Asia Awards, International Architecture Awards, Asia Pacific Property Awards, Urban Design & Architecture Design Awards and QS Awards.

Other pioneering projects that hold a place close to Chen's heart are Discovery Bay, an outlying island resort, as well as the 10-hectare Hong Kong Park.

It's this diversity that initially appealed to him, as well as the firm's commitment to innovation. "We did a lot of first-of-a-kind projects," he reflects.

The company was also one of the first to venture into China, with Chen working on projects that were on the cutting edge for their time.

"We did a lot of firsts in mainland China," he says, adding that Wong Tung & Partners is growing its Chinese presence with four offices "strategically located" in the north, east, south and west. "Each of them is run by one of our veteran colleagues from Hong Kong, who is ready to roll their sleeves up and get more work done."

NEXT GEN

The "strong and experienced leadership" that had held him in such awe when he first started with Wong Tung & Partners almost 30 years ago only passed along the baton a few years ago, with Chen one of those chosen to safeguard its legacy into the future.

He has never thought about leaving in all that time, he reveals. “I’m not one of those people who like to jump around – I hang on,” he says. “It suited me and I hope they say I suited the office too.”

A big part of the reason he has never felt the urge to move on is the people, not only those inspiring founding members who were at the company’s helm when he came on board, but also the team members with whom he has worked over the years.

It’s a culture that helped the company withstand the trials of the pandemic, as well as the political upheaval of the years prior, which was in many ways even more unsettling for Wong Tung & Partners, according to Chen. “It was unexpected. We all had to think a bit and try to cope with the situation,” he recalls.

The pandemic, by contrast, didn’t massively affect the company. Even though it wasn’t badly hit, it did have to adjust to the new working conditions and ensure all of its people were adapting well. Everyone in the company looked out for their colleagues. “If every one of us is healthy, then we are healthy as a whole,” Chen says.



“I can’t wait for the pandemic to go away, but I think we have benefited a little bit as a result of it. I’m hoping this kind of work ethic will stick with us for a long, long time.”

It also provided an opportunity to reassess, smoothing out any issues – with the end result that the company has emerged from the pandemic in a better position than before. “Not just physically, but mentally,” he insists. “Mentally, we need to be able to meet the challenges. Maybe we don’t know what’s going to happen the following week, but we are prepared; we are flexible.”

One of the biggest surprises for Chen was that, although presented with the choice to work from home, many of its people actually preferred to come into the office. “But we allowed total flexibility to all our colleagues, as long as they stay connected,” he adds.

Although he admits that productivity is slightly down, he sees this as a common problem. “For the past two years, we see a lot more understanding among ourselves from us to our clients and even from clients to contractors on-site. We all understand,” he says.

“We just tried to soldier on with a lot of understanding from all over, all directions. Everyone now understands how important it is to take care of ourselves before we take care of the people around us. That is a prerequisite.”

This shift is demonstrating itself in several key ways. Chen has noticed a difference in the way his teams and projects are working and has been “pleasantly surprised”.

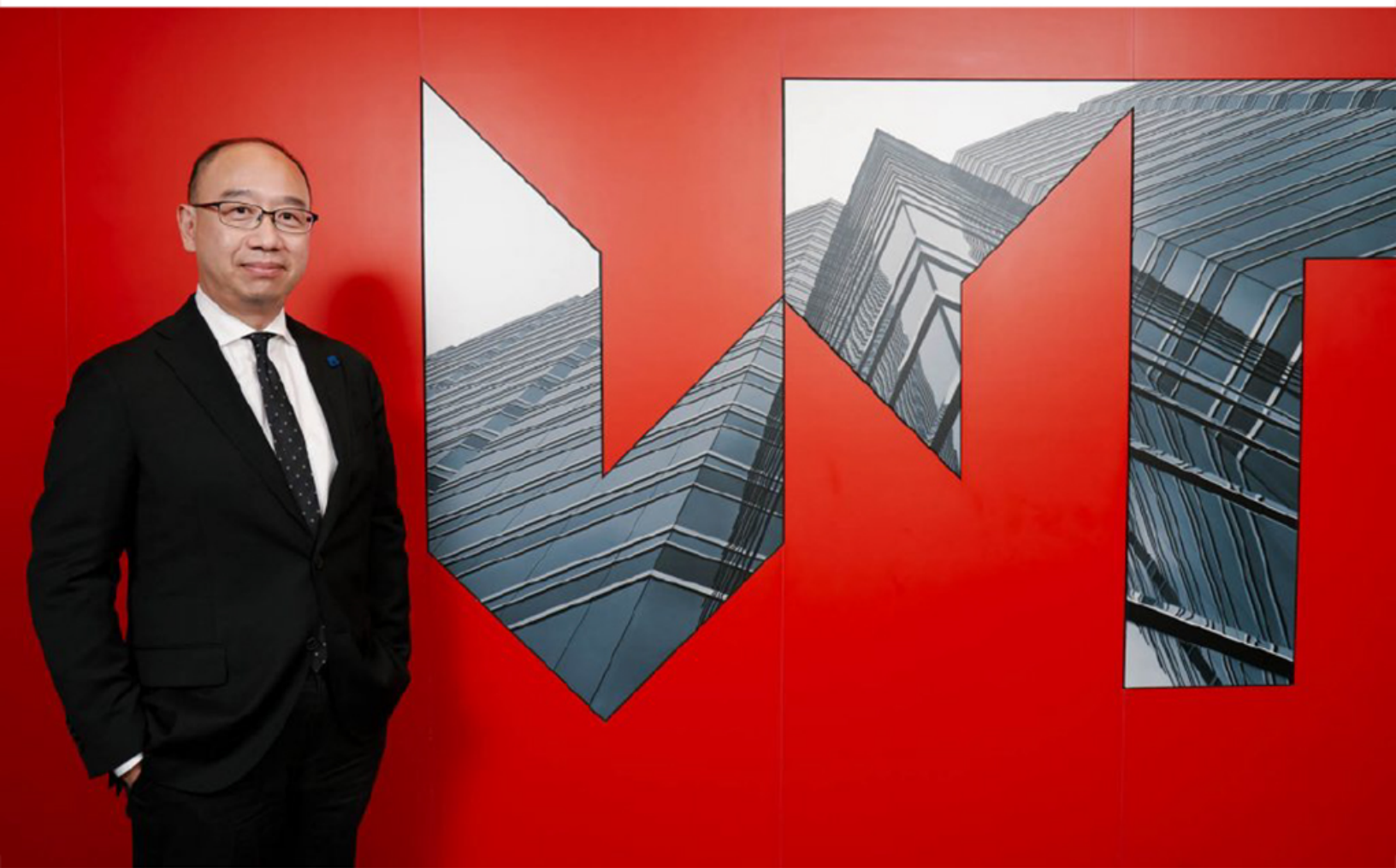
“They seem to be more together than before,” he reveals. “Now, I actually see a lot more communication among the team members. I can’t wait for the pandemic to go away, but I think we have benefited a little bit as a result of it. I’m hoping this kind of work ethic will stick with us for a long, long time.”

FUTURE VISION

As the company moves forward, growth is on Chen’s mind, but not necessarily in terms of size. “I would like the company and everyone in it to grow in confidence,” he says. “I think we cannot have enough of that.”

There are plenty of opportunities opening up too. In Hong Kong, the government is expected to lead some new building works that will be good news for Wong Tung & Partners. The Northern Metropolis development is one plan that offers great potential, and the Lantau Tomorrow Vision promises even more opportunities for the entire profession.

“We are looking forward to that and more opportunities to contribute to society and our community,” he states. “We are bracing ourselves for all these newer projects to come. We are getting ourselves knowledgeable in terms of technologies and the kind of service that either the government or investors will be looking for.”



While the necessary know-how, hardware and software all play into this, the foremost concern in this increasingly competitive market is mindset, according to Chen.

“What is needed by the community, and therefore what is needed by our potential clients, and perhaps, what’s needed by the company from our architects? These are the things that we are looking into as we prepare ourselves for the next round of challenges,” he says.

“We may not necessarily grow in terms of number of people, but we want to become more adaptive and skillful, so that we will be able to do more and better projects. No doubt they will become more challenging. We will be ready.”

Sponsored by: Grand Ming Group

One of the most reliable and reputable building construction companies in Hong Kong for over 25 years, the Group believes construction is a process of connecting hearts.

[Read More](#)

