

BACK PAGE


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Designs on the future

Hong Kong-based architect with a mission embraces the Belt and Road as key to his firm's corporate strategy

By **DENG YANZI** in Hong Kong
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Nicholas Ho Lik-chi was only 27 years old when he took on the tough task more than three years ago to transform his Hong Kong-based architectural firm into an international business.

As the deputy managing director of Ho & Partners Architects Engineers & Development Consultants (HPA), Ho has already made major progress in his stated mission by securing large-scale projects in the Philippines and Malaysia.

He said the company's growth was driven by the opportunities offered by China's Belt and Road Initiative. Proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the initiative aims to connect over 60 countries across the ancient Silk Road routes — including Southeast Asian countries — for closer economic and cultural cooperation.

Ho is not the conventional interlocutor of grand corporate plans. At 31 he is slight and soft-spoken, with rectangular glasses and a narrow chin beard. He wears a short-sleeved black T-shirt, exposing extensive tattoos that cover both his arms.

He is not shy about discussing his distinctive style. "This is how I usually look when I attend business meetings, even with government officials," Ho said.

The inked message on his right forearm declares, next to a sketching pencil: "Leave this world a little better than you found it." Encircling his entire left arm is a floral, figurative tattoo. And he gives his collar a tug to reveal the latest decoration on his upper chest, fresh from a tattoo shop in Taipei.

Initially, in 2013, when Ho took up this role at his family's architectural firm, suit and tie was his standard attire.

"I was young, hoping to prove myself," he recalled. "Now that I have proven it with my accomplishments, I prefer my down-to-earth style."

HPA was established in 1980 by Ho's father, Bosco Ho Hin-ngai, an architect of local repute. During the past four decades, the firm has completed architectural design for projects mostly in Hong Kong and Chinese mainland cities.

Some of the most recognizable works by HPA in Hong Kong include the Hong Kong Baptist University and the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

As tighter housing policies hit the Chinese mainland market, Ho was tasked three years ago with consolidating and expanding the firm's presence in Southeast Asia.

The young architect leaped at the chance offered by the Belt and Road to accomplish the firm's crucial goal of regional expansion.

Ho joined various Hong Kong business delegations to Southeast Asian countries and gained a fuller understanding of the opportunities the Belt and Road would bring his professional services firm.

"Hong Kong will be exporting its high-quality services and technologies in China's infrastructure projects under the initiative, while big Chinese mainland corporations will serve as the ignition key that unleashes the economic potential of the developing countries," Ho said.

The architectural firm decided to set up an office in Malaysia, as its overseas headquarters, with a specific focus on serving Belt and Road projects.

In the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, HPA has been involved in the master plan for the Taman TAR district, the facade and interior design for the Subang Avenue shopping mall, and the residential development of the Sungai Long district.

Earlier this year, the firm successfully won the bid to design the New Manila Bay International Community in the Philippine capital, Manila. Dubbed the City of Pearl, the project is a 407-hectare reclamation project, which will also be a high-tech commercial and tourism center.

A memorandum of understanding was signed by the Philippine Reclamation Authority and the project's Chinese investor, UAA Kinming Group Development Corp, in February. As one of the China-Philippine projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, it received the backing of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and the city government of Manila.

Governments' top-down support for Belt and Road projects is reassuring, Ho said.

"In our past efforts in the Southeast Asian market, our company had to work in isolation. But now with the Belt and Road Initiative, we can team up with governments and major developers in large-scale projects," he said.

Apart from the City of Pearl, HPA is also involved in the development of an industrial park and an office building in the Philippines.



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HPA is an example of how professional firms from Hong Kong can benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative, according to Ho.

The Southeast Asian markets, especially Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia, have always had strong confidence in Hong Kong's ability to offer professional services, he said.

"In a Belt and Road project, Hong Kong will serve as the conductor of the orchestra.

"We see ourselves as the chief planner and development consultant in a Belt and Road project, rather than merely a designer. We can also provide valuation services and a network of business partners to the local companies," he said.

HPA's projects in Belt and Road countries currently account for around 20 percent of its total revenue, according to Ho, and he aims to expand that to one-third, with the rest split evenly between its Hong Kong and Chinese mainland businesses.

As the company shifts its focus south, he hopes to repeat its success in Malaysia and the Philippines in other Southeast Asian markets.

Ho said Hong Kong will team up with the Chinese mainland in these overseas investment projects, and this will be "HPA's direction in the decades to come".

He sees this new direction as essential for the firm to remain competitive

and sustainable. "I treat it as the (new corporate strategy) of the company established by my father," he said.

Ho recalled that he showed an interest in design at an early age in his obsession with Lego toys.

When he was around 6 years old, he started to "go to work" with his busy father, who would sometimes give him fun tasks to build models. At the age of 13, he would accompany his father on business trips.

Growing up, Ho eventually recognized his passion to become an architect, like his father. He headed to the United Kingdom to obtain a bachelor's degree and a diploma in architecture, where he also worked for some renowned names in the field including the late Zaha Hadid.

Having learned from some of the world's most talented architects, Ho believes that the very best design would somehow integrate British architects' attention to detail, the Americans' innovation and audacity, and the Chinese application of traditional culture.

And yet, Ho's father remains his most important inspiration as an architect.

"My father always told me that a successful architecture firm is one-third design, one-third execution and one-third service," he said.

"After all, running an architecture firm is totally different from being an architecture designer."

Bio

Nicholas Ho Lik-chi

Deputy managing director, Ho & Partners Architects Engineers & Development Consultants (HPA)

Managing director, hpa Design Studio (SE Asia)

Education:

2006-08: Bachelor of architecture, University of Greenwich, United Kingdom

2008-10: Diploma in architecture, Architectural Association, UK

Career milestones:

2015-present: Deputy managing director, HPA

2015-present: Managing director, hpa Design Studio (SE Asia)

2011-13: Assistant project designer, Leigh & Orange, Hong Kong

2008: Intern, Zaha Hadid Architects, London

Awards:

2012-13: A' Design Award silver medal, Italy

2013: Successful Design Awards — China

2013: International Design Awards (IDA) honorable mention, United States

Community involvement:

2016-19: Council member, Council of Lingnan University, Hong Kong

2017-18: Council member, Hong Kong Institute of Architects

2016: Member, HKSAR Economic Development Commission Working Group on Professional Services

Quick takes:

When did you make the career choice to become an architect?
Before I chose my major at university, I tried other things. But I realized I did love design very much.

If you were not an architect today, what would you be doing instead?
Charity work.

What was your first project for HPA?

It was the architecture and interior design of the SuperD Technology Centre in Shenzhen (in South China's Guangdong province), which featured a smart control system and green materials. We ended up winning two China Property Awards and two Asia-Pacific Property Awards for this project.

What is the project that you are most satisfied with?
They all have their imperfections.

What does being an architect mean?

Architecture is a vast profession. We need to see things from the perspective of a designer, a sociologist, a developer and also a citizen.

Date of birth: Nov 19, 1986