



JOHN LOW

Co-Founder and Principal at
Laguarda.Low

By Phoebe Kut

Despite the advent of the 'Age of E-Commerce,' physical commercial and retail developments in China continue to thrive. With projects from Guangzhou to Dalian and everywhere in between, Laguarda.Low is an international architecture firm that is no stranger to rapid development in China. We sat down with John Low, co-founder and principal at Laguarda.Low, to chat about some of his major projects in Shenzhen and the cultural differences of working in the East versus the West.

Can you tell us how the firm initially entered the Chinese market?

Prior to making the move to China, I was working in Japan for over 10 years. Japan will be one of the first countries to go through a demographic shift; there's a larger elderly population, so there will be a limit to growth. Around the 2000s, China was starting to pick up. Naturally, it was a good move, so that was sort of the impetus. In the last 10 years, close to 70% of our projects are in China, but we still stay global with projects in Brazil, Japan and Europe.

What was Shenzhen like 20 years ago?

Back then, obviously, it wasn't as developed; Nanshan was filled with a lot of old residential buildings. Shenzhen as a city has grown a lot; it's probably one of the fastest-growing cities. We were really fortunate that Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) hired us for OCT Harbour. The project first started as a competition; OCT had previously worked with other foreign international firms and in the end it was down to us and another Spanish firm competing for the job. We won and, as they say, the rest is history.

Which project in China has been your favorite so far?

That's kind of like asking a parent who is your favorite son or daughter. But, I would say the one with the most social impact is OCT Harbour. That was a project where I was the principal, and I worked on it for well over five years, from beginning until completion.

How long does a project usually take from start to finish?

It depends on the scale. For example, OCT Harbour was a fairly significant project. The lake itself was man-made and had to be excavated, and it's over six meters deep. I remember when I visited the site seeing all the workers scattered across it like ants – it was a huge undertaking.

Your firm has various international projects; what is something interesting or different about the ones in China?

There is more room for innovation in China. Developers are much more open-minded, experimental and aggressive compared to developers in the US, Europe or Japan. Projects in the West have much less margin for error; as the market is very fixed, developers cannot afford to take as much risk. Additionally, people in China are very innovative – when presented with a problem they always try to find a solution. Whereas in the West, we will be told something is too difficult and cannot be completed.

Could you touch upon some exciting projects that are in the works right now?

Our next biggest project is Hongshan 6979, which is a major transport-oriented development (TOD), meaning it is built next to a major metro system. Hongshan 6979 in itself is a little city, so it is quite exciting. It's a new neighborhood and over 300,000 square meters, a huge project. It will open in December of this year. The other major project is the Bao'an waterfront project, perhaps opening next year or the year after. With these large-scale projects, we'd like to think we're positively contributing to the daily lives of people.



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