



21 NOVEMBER 2019 - 11:59 AM

CONSTRUCTION & TRADES ASIA

Starting from zero: Ivy Lee

With humanity and sustainability at the forefront, Leigh & Orange Managing Director Ivy Lee shares why she's the right woman to steer one of Hong Kong's oldest design firms.



Ivy Lee

Managing Director, Leigh & Orange

Words - **Anastasia Prikhodko**



COMMENT

Ivy Lee is the youngest Managing Director at Leigh & Orange (L&O) in its 145 years of business as an architectural practice. She is also the first woman to lead the architecture and design firm since its establishment by two British men in 1875.

“When I was promoted to Managing Director, there were many challenges to be overcome. I was a long-term employee and I had a good understanding of L&O’s culture, but you can never actually anticipate or plan such things. There’s never a right time; it’s like you always want to wait for the best moment to let your children take over, but you have to let them try and the company was confident enough to pass the baton to the next generation.”

Ivy has been with the firm for 21 years. Joining straight after finishing her master’s degree in architecture from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, she initially took on a junior role as an architectural assistant.

“The company offers equal opportunity for all staff to rise to senior management roles. It’s something that has helped sustain us for so many years and is something we are very proud of,” she enthuses.

Speaking about the changes the company has gone through, Ivy explains that in its initial 100 years L&O shaped and witnessed the evolution of the city. “We were involved in the first major university building in Hong Kong, along with the first reclamation project, the first public housing and the first commercial district. A century ago, an L&O partner also donated a hospital on the Peak.”

Then with society’s changing needs and greater private wealth, the company began to evolve along with the changing socio-economic situation. “The typologies started to change because in our first century there was a focus on supporting people’s basic living as a society and the city developed. But this was ideal for L&O as it has always been about new challenges.”

In the 1980s, the company entered the mainland China market and has since built up a portfolio of successful projects and devoted clientele. Once L&O established itself in the mainland China market, it devoted resources into seeking and carrying out projects outside of Hong Kong, including the Middle East and South-East Asia.

“We had been working on hospitality projects in South-East Asia, including Myanmar and Thailand, and some commercial projects in Malaysia around the turn of the century. Then about 10 to 15 years ago, Macau started to change and it began to plan and build the first international integrated resorts. L&O’s first major project was the City of Dreams in Macau, with several hotels, a large casino and spectacular entertainment components. A challenging but amazing project that the L&O team put their heart and soul into. It was a true collaboration with the client and a large consultant and contractor team.”

Ivy adds, “Before that, my first project was the Hong Kong Science Park Phase 2. That was a very new project back then as the government had just started to invest in science and technology innovation and research.”

The site is served by an energy-saving district cooling system, with energy-efficient and passively designed buildings. With this year marking the company’s 145th anniversary, the focus is now, more than ever, on innovation and sustainability.



“We are doing the modular integrated construction pilot scheme in Hong Kong for the Science Park. The scheme aligns with the Hong Kong government’s policy about innovation in the building industry and is a way to help resolve a lack of construction workers,” Ivy says. “We have to do more offsite construction. Modular integrated construction is a very new concept in Hong Kong, but the team feels positive that we can succeed.”

A lot has changed in the past 10 years. “Before we only talked about sustainable design and now that’s a norm. It’s a must-have. The next phase is focusing on innovation and smart,” she says.

“We also talk about how to incorporate robotics and DfMA (Design for Manufacture and Assembly) into our designs. So, there is not just design, we have to also think about how to construct these designs and with whatever appropriate innovations we can find to satisfy the projects’ needs.”

Looking at the road ahead, L&O will continue to seek expansion throughout China, South-East Asia and the Middle East, while serving the Hong Kong market. Ivy confirms, “We have to continue to serve the Hong Kong market, which is steady but, like all markets, has trends that affect all design professionals, not only architects.”

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While maintaining its current ground, L&O will also look into other countries on the Belt and Road Initiative. “We are very selective and consequently we’re not trying to be everywhere,” Ivy adds. “We are quite mindful not to overexpand because we want to have reasonable control of all our projects, and our staff and their welfare.”

For Ivy, continuous expansion is not a priority. Instead, it's about the quality of the projects and clients, and the sustainability of the company and its people. She says L&O needs to make sure its people are happy by finding projects that help them grow and nurture creativity.

“We are not seeking only profit by taking on lots of commercial projects; we want a diversity of projects that enlivens the team, helps the company grow organically and keeps us active and relevant for the next generation. We relish new types of projects. That means I seek projects that can provide inspiration to the company and the people. That is one of our high-level objectives.”

It is not by accident that diversity, history and project experience are elements that set L&O apart from its competitors. “We do pretty much any building typology. That means every time we have a new project our people have to start from scratch – to research, investigate and challenge ourselves and our partners. That provides us with a robust approach to our projects and a certain stability. We are fortunate in achieving such a dynamic balance of work.”

Ivy also makes it clear that partnerships are vital. “We maintain close relationships with partners we have worked with – even those that have been our client – and the skilled specialist sub-consultants that we engage for our projects. We all work closely together, no matter whether they are overseas- or Hong Kong-based. If you are unable to work as partners, the project will not succeed.

“Sustainability is at the heart of our company and a true core value,” Ivy says. “The company rests on four pillars: integrity, humanity, creativity and sustainability. These are the four things that are key to the success of our projects.” She adds: “We have to uphold humanity and the concept of quality in all we do.”

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Along with providing employees with insurance and other direct benefits, L&O has designed their new office spaces to achieve a 'green office', which received a Platinum rating under the BEAM Plus Interiors certification. Employees are also offered exercise classes and free-of-charge fruit. “That's all helping them to have a better lifestyle,” she says.

At L&O the number-one goal is to build the most appropriate buildings for clients suited to their goals and aspirations, followed closely by goal number two: ensuring the longevity of the company.

“For this company to grow in the right way, you have to make sure your people are happy. Of course, you have to make enough money to sustain the business and keep your staff happy, but making money is not our top or only priority,” she says, adding: “If you have good people and you retain them, they will help you to succeed and to exceed client expectations. It's that simple.”

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