



PUBLIC ART AGENCY FINLAND



Meeting with Franklin Po

October 30, 2016

Continuing my discussions with people that work in the field of creating the urban areas in Singapore, I met with Franklin Po, the founder of both Tierra Design, a leading and well-respected landscape architectural firm in Singapore since 1993, and PODesign, a sister company specializing in architectural and interior design. Trained in the US, with an office in Singapore, he has designed an array of award winning buildings and urban surroundings all over Asia, with a signature approach that combines natural elements and greenery with a highly creative approach to architectural form. So, does he ever use artists, in creating these magical worlds? Would he like to? Energetic and friendly, this man with more than 40 years of experience from the field and a knowledge on architectural history spanning even further through the decades, met me at his office to talk about art. My citations on **bold**, his in *bold italics*.

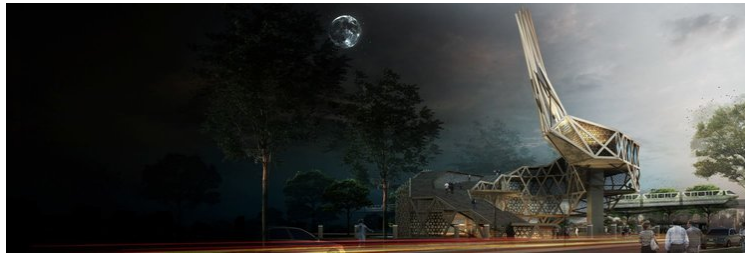


A visualization of one of the many imaginative, sculptural residential buildings designed by PODesign / Tierra Design. Photo: PODesign / Tierra Design

- What do you personally think professional artists can bring to your projects if they are involved? In what case would that be needed or wanted - or not?

- *Cities often give incentives to bring art as part of building projects. Singapore had this; Los Angeles has this - so it can be mandated. So as a developer, when you put in a sculpture, you get extra gross floor ratio. So this is an incentive for the developer. So we've done several buildings like this, where they've bought the art, and then they've placed it in the plaza in front, for example. So we haven't had that much interaction, except for, to say where it's going to be placed.*

- So basically in the cases you have worked with artists, the integration has not been big - basically you have shown them where the sculpture can be put, and that's about it?



A proposal for a new mosque in Punggol. Photo: PODesign / Tierra Design

- *That's about it, yes. - There was one project in which art was asked for. But in that case it was more coming from the point of view of feng shui - like "we need water here", or "something of metal here" - things like that. And they wanted me to curate the art. So here I wasn't thinking quite quickly enough: I said I'd be very happy to design the artworks - there were nine of them - and all my water features could've been art! But in the end we didn't win it. Another guy came in and said, "I can curate art and design, I can do everything!" - So we didn't get this project.*

We discussed further the diffusion or roles in the world of art and design. Many artists work more like designers these days - like Koons - just getting their designs built and signing them. Then on the other hand you have architects that will get to the finest details in their designs, and design features that could be seen as artworks. One example is the chrysalis pyramid in the Louvre courtyard (designed by Chinese American architect I.M. Pei). **"He was solving an architectural problem, but still, you can see it as an artwork as well." (1)**

We discussed how approaches to art differ from one company to another. If a company sees itself as doing artistic design or even art, the approach to artists coming from outside the company is different from those who might not, themselves, have such a strong design language. Interesting collaboration can stem from many starting points though, and in the end, I



In Park Royal, landscape planning and architecture join hands, creating one of the most extraordinary buildings found in a city with no shortage of extraordinary buildings. This hotel found in the heart of Singapore is one of the most awarded projects by Franklin Po and his multidisciplinary team, that worked together with the architects from WOHA, Singapore on the project. Photo: PODesign / Tierra Design

feel, it really does come down to the individuals, and how they get along. It takes a certain connection and mutual appreciation to be able to attain artistic goals together.

As our conversation progressed, I got the impression, that although their collaboration with artists has mostly consisted of artworks coming to the project from outside, there would indeed be interest in working with artists in a closer sort of collaboration. Say, in a project where the company is responsible for creating the whole landscape around and inside a new housing area, for example. He felt that in these kinds of surroundings there would indeed be a lot of opportunities for integrated art in the sense that I'm promoting it, that is, as an integral, meaningful part of the overall design, rather than separate sculptures curated and placed there afterwards **(2)**. And it would also be cheaper, than commissioning separate artworks.

- But it does take the focus of somebody who is already in this business - as a sculptor, as a painter... whatever. There's so many ways you can do it! Like, if I ask you, this water stretch right here, can you transform it into a piece of art? Even a bridge can be designed into a piece of art. So where does it really stop? There's no limit to what can be done, it's all part of our repertoire.

- Yes, if you have money in the project.

- Well, it has to be a real project first, obviously. And then yes, you're right, one can design a stair in whatever way. When you look at Gaudi; is it an apartment or is it more than that? It's more than that!

- I'd love to have the kind of individuals in my office, that we could say "All our walkways are not just walkways anymore - they become eventful spaces. A stair is no longer a stair - you're changing levels from here to here and along the way, something happens."

Listening to him, I felt that for an artist to be able to become part of this field, they would have to be around. They would have to be there, available for the use of the company's design projects, in a flexible way. The current go-to way to have talent around is to hire it. The flexible sorts of collaboration between individuals, through different forms of micro entrepreneurship or whatever the future holds, are just not here yet. So hiring someone is still your best bet in getting the most out of their talent. Close collaboration rises from presence - this is why I think all these creative hubs are gaining momentum among startups, because they nurture otherwise unimaginable connections.



A night view of Ion Orchard, Orchard Turn - a combined commercial & residential project in Singapore. Photo: PODesign / Tierra Design

On the other hand, a full time hired artist is not really needed in a company like this. A part-time one, maybe, or someone that can make themselves useful also by doing something else, at times when art projects are not on the design table. This is how I got into this field - disguised as an architect! I now run my own company, but in my last job, I was hired as an architect, but my role shifted inside the company, because of my skills and ambitions as an artist. So I'd say, that other artists could do the same, through different channels. To be useful in a company like this might be through know-how in graphic design, 3D modeling, or other design related, supporting tasks, which contemporary artists are often skillful in. The opportunities, you see, to do artistic work in a design project might come and go very fast, and you'd just need to be available, there and then. Close collaboration only happens when you're close enough. This, in turn, could open the door to possibilities we can't even think of yet.



Franklin Po and me against a background of one of the many artworks on the walls of his office.

*SO, you ask me about art, I say,
"Where do you want to go?" I think it's
wide open, and I don't think there are
limits.*

Yes, I guess there are limits only in the
imagination of authorities.

*No even the authorities, they won't
bother you - if you take a wall and
want to do something with it, as long
as I doesn't violate any of their
guidelines, in terms of safety and
health, you see. The authorities are not the issue, it's just the question of whether
or not we limit our own imagination.*

Indeed.

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UUTISKIRJE LOGOT ENGLISH SUOMI

Public Art Agency Finland | Hallituskatu 22, 33200, Tampere, Finland

+358 44 502 3252 | info@paaf.fi | alv.rek. y-tunnus: 2415812-8

