DC: There appears to be a proliferation of aggressive international architectural practices in the last two or three decades. One possible reason may be the ease of travel and communication due to the collapse of distance that comes with modern technologies. The financial crisis may also have had its contribution, as many practices try to expand into the emerging markets. This provides architects with a new business model, allowing them to minimize their locality dependency and counter the regional business cycle by working in different countries, thus diversifying their job portfolios in terms of places where their projects are located as well as clientele. This may also be the resultant effect of the ‘architectural star system’, where the architect and his branding image, rather than the building itself, become the commodity of marketing and an ‘agency’ of architecture. This new approach has caused fundamental changes on how architects create architecture and how the practice of architecture will evolve in the future. It is the norm of cutting-edge architectural practices nowadays, to extend their work across boundaries, cultural and geographical. Hence, the effect of this trend on Hong Kong’s architectural practices and how we may increase our competitiveness in the face of this global practice would be a topic worth discussing.

TK: Architects are confronted with critical issues such as globalization and localization. I am concerned with the subject of identity. Taking Poly U’s Innovative Tower as an example, it is definitely a ‘Zaha building’, but is it in the right context and scale? Is it in the right kind of language? Does it align with the existing fabric within the campus? At the moment, the construction looks overwhelming and everyone is really anticipating a Zaha building in Hong Kong. But at the same time, are we phasing into a stage of homogeneity in contemporary practice?

VN: In fact, speaking as a local architect working in collaboration with different international architects, we do not have much input in terms of design. When the decision is made to select an international architect, one would not question the compatibility of the design with its context and surroundings. There is a certain degree of freedom with the design, which I would consider as one of the pros. Irrespective of whether they are talented or hardworking, I think that Hong Kong architects tend to be ‘killed’ by these questions from the clients, ‘is the railing too low?’ ‘Can we fence off the whole building?’... The interesting thing is international architects do not answer these questions. With an international architect, there is always some respect from the client – they would respect the design. In this case, introducing international architects to Hong Kong can actually bring in more diversity to the local profession, and show clients and citizens the potential of architecture in Hong Kong.
TK: I can observe that local partners are more involved in paperwork and do not have an active role in the whole design process. I participated in the development of City U’s Libeskind project, and it seems that Leigh and Orange’s role was rather heavy on getting through BD approval procedures.

BEL: From my personal experience, I think the nature and the result of having this kind of collaboration is different from conventional way of having one architect to take on multiple roles in design and construction. Instead, when these roles are shared among two independent architects with different perspectives, it would actually enhance the design. As part of the ‘star architect’ effect, it brings up the synergy of the whole process as well. The clients, consultants and contractors are all very keen on delivering quality.

LL: In fact, the ‘star architect’ is often just a veneer of the branding and design in projects. I think the issue is not about whether foreign firms should adapt culturally – it is a question of final quality produced, regardless who the ‘design’ architect is. Most people only see the architecture as its exterior appearance, but I think that a good building should be reflected in its final overall quality. I think that is what the outside world doesn’t see, and it should actually be our responsibility as architects to educate our clients on the best way to achieve better overall quality through collaboration.

Another point is that clients have changed in recent years. One of the largest factors of change in our industry is how financial capital and hence clients are globalized today. There are New York clients building in Hong Kong, who tend to hire New York or European architects instead of local firms. That is the reality of globalization. Similarly, Hong Kong clients are usually only brave enough to go to China, instead of exploring new markets like India or the Middle East with their Hong Kong architects.

DS: I think the ‘star architects’ tend to be very competitive on designing, but a very good point which Laurence has made is that it doesn’t matter who designs the building, it is quality that counts. Many Hong Kong firms compete in the international arena, because they have expertise in certain niche markets. L&O has much experience and good track-record on equine projects outside of Hong Kong. Another thing is that clients do not hire an architect solely for their architectural services, but also for marketing purposes.

TK: I think that goes back to Laurence’s comment about the veneer effect. The veneer of branding a design definitely exists as our marketing culture these days are all about seeking signature architecture as evident in many residential projects.

DC: That also comes back to the original question of the roles that we assign to the architect we hire. In the global practice nowadays, architects no longer stay within the traditional envelope of architectural practice. The architect himself can be a commodity in the trade, instead of the building. This is part of the trend in globalizing the architectural practice.

TK: In the case of OPUS Hong Kong where Swire had originally designed the building for only 12 units for the directors of the company. There were no real marketing strategy in such urgency we discussed, so what was the role of Frank Gehry on this job? Bring in new technique and technology? or other extra values for Hong Kong?

BL: Firstly, I think Swire Properties has the unique vision to bring top designers to add value to each project. When they hired Thomas Heatherwick for the renovation of Pacific Place, it was before the Olympics or the Shanghai Expo and not too many people know Thomas Heatherwick. I believe Swire has helped to push the design frontier in Hong Kong and show other developers that this can be financially rewarding. OPUS was operating on certain economic risk, and the scale of 12 units makes the risk acceptable. We have seen a similar effect at One Hyde Park development in London. What makes Opus special is that somebody is trying to do something unique for Hong Kong, and found an opportunity and a piece of land to do it. Frank also bought the possibility of unique design can add value to a project to HK. While I believe HK designer has the ability to do this, it would be very difficult to convince a developer to hire a HK architect to do this. We need someone like Frank to break the barrier.

DC: Why do clients hire designers from outside Hong Kong whenever they want to have an innovative design with new approaches or creative concepts?

BEL: I heard that Hysan actually hired KPF as the design architect for Hysan Place because they wanted to separate the role of executive architect and design architect. However, no one in Hong Kong would like to become the executive architect for another local design architect and vice versa, so they had to find a design architect elsewhere.

DS: What I think we do not strongly have in Hong Kong is a really good designer who produces design at that level. There are smaller firms doing some interesting things, but we haven’t really had someone here with a very strong design profile, probably because the market just has not allowed it, but it can be possible.

BL: What I appreciate about having these ‘star architects’ is that it helps restart the dialogue in design. Nevertheless, my personal take has always been whether there should be global architecture. What does it mean for architecture to be global? Shouldn’t our design/our building address the issue of local culture, politics, and community? These elements are important aspects in the sustainability cycle of a building and the community it influences. Should architecture really go global? Maybe for some projects, but is that the right approach for every building? I have had the same conversation with others about the future of architecture in terms of sustainability—should that be something we need to consider?

VN: I believe we are heading for that direction, but it would not be easy to achieve the ideal scenario. The client base of Hong Kong seems very narrow to me. Some clients tend to pick foreign architects, and others ask Hong Kong architects to do relatively mundane or mediocre projects. There are so few clients to choose from that it is hard to experiment and try different things.
So what can we expect? What do you expect ASD to do when they always ask for the cost-effective approach? It is never easy to break out of this scenario. Do we have any clients who would actually help promote a good building? The West Kowloon Cultural District may be asking for innovation, but how can we break up that client base?

LL: If we are associating good design and innovation to expensive buildings, I would disagree. It is one of our responsibilities as a good architect to minimize waste of materials and use sustainable construction methods to satisfy all needs, and that actually should lower the life-cycle cost of buildings.

BL: What we need are time and resources. Very often, with the general fees we get, there is no way we can do it here in Hong Kong. We are collecting a fee of 3% to 1% of the construction costs, which is roughly about 30% of the project cost, while the agent gets 1% of the project costs plus profits. In the US the construction costs is 70% of the project costs, so HK architects are getting the smaller end of the pie. I just cannot wrap my head around it as our fee is spread over the duration of the project which is about 5 years. We need the resources to do research, like other overseas firms in order to have the confidence to convince our clients that our innovation has value.

DC: What is the reason behind this? At the present, it is obvious that the market values the estate agent more than the architect in term of fees. So what are our deficiencies?

BL: Architects simply do not have a direct correlation to sales as our works is a team effort. Furthermore, we do not know how to do branding, and that is why the clients are asking architects from outside to come in and design some of our building. Many commercial office buildings now are designed by overseas architects.

LL: Comparing Hong Kong today with the situation in Singapore. A decade ago, I would have said that Hong Kong was way ahead of Singapore in terms of both its own design and the influence of international architects. What I find interesting is not the wide variety of international architects working in Singapore today, but the fact that Singaporean architects have begun to brand themselves collectively overseas. What the institutes there have done, and what the URA has published is really impressive. They have actually started branding Singaporean architects and planners and exporting them with Singaporean investment backing them in real projects. Their Government says ‘We want Singaporeans to build eco-cities in Tianjin, Suzhou, Chengdu, Bangalore, Dubai etc.’ This process had actually begun more than 15 years ago by Government supporting innovative firms big and small. Our Government has yet to realize their role in energizing our profession to export design services overseas. We cannot just depend on the private sector for such a collective effort.

BL: The local government simply has to recognize architectural design is an exportable service, where we can actually earn foreign fee and promote HK design at the same time. Using the Foster designed HK International Airport as an example, did any Hong Kong architects involved in the design of the HK International Airport? Without doubt, it is a great airport, but none of us in HK was involved, there was no knowledge transfer to the local practices. So when China cities want to invite a HK firm to design their airport, none of us have the experiences. On one hand, we need international architects to educate us. Nowadays, if HK students need to see the best buildings in the world, they have to be in Japan, Korea, Singapore, Beijing and Shanghai. There is no new exciting stuff in HK but I have hope that the WKC will change this.

TK: So what are the reciprocal benefits for local architects in this globalized phenomenon? We had brought in the foreign architects who were given ample budgets. Foreign architects are given much more flexibility than the local architects, at least from the clients’ perspectives. For instance, L&O has definitely nurtured a niche market in doing aquariums, arenas and projects of similar scale and caliber. Will their architects venture anywhere outside the Asia Pacific region? Will Hong Kong architects be able to step out of and excel beyond Hong Kong?

DC: I do not think it is true that foreign architects have a bigger budget. The cost depends on the specific project and its budget, and not where the architect is from, although it is probable that foreign architects have a higher profile and usually work on bigger projects that have a larger construction sum. My concern is the suggestion that we need to protect our local market by having some kind of protectionism which could prevent the hiring of the best architects for the project. When we spend money, we would want to get the best architecture. Just imagine, if the Sydney Opera House is organized by limiting the design by having local competition only, it would be a totally different building, but now it is the ‘Opera House of Sydney’, an Australian icon despite the design is by a Danish architect.

LL: Is this an issue about the procurement of design services as well? Some believe better designs are produced through design competitions, but others argue that competitions are too time-consuming. After winning a competition, the team has to fight for the so-called winning design to be built according to budget. This is probably a model of procuring architectural services that would influence design quality. When I did my first architectural competition in China in 1996, I found it quite backward then, but subsequently the same process improved and has produced CCTV, National Stadium Shanghai Tower etc. Even if only one out of a hundred competitions produces an outstanding design, that could make a difference to society. In Hong Kong, this process of design competitions producing innovation (open or shortlisted) has still a long way to go.
DC: Our architectural practice has not taken into consideration how the modern society is operating. Although everyone says that architecture is an art, it is in reality a business. We need to make money in order to make good buildings. A big international firm would probably have some 200 million USD as their annual turnover, which enables them to research, to deliver, and to get the best talents. In Hong Kong, very few have a strong R&D department, and if we are looking at the future of practicing architecture, we would need a lot of research, but we are not getting enough from universities, nor are we doing it ourselves.

BL: Competitions can be seen as a form of research. Many of the famous Scandinavian firms grew out of design competition in the last 10 years. Many firms in Europe have a research section and have an integrated approach but you are right that HK firms do not do enough research.

TK: I strongly agree that industry should work with academia on research development. I think Arup is perhaps a good example, with their established R&D section doing practical research that can bring direct benefits to our practices.

BL: We have tried to set up some sort of research in sustainability design in our office. It was something that I had been consciously trying to do. We see it more as general education process, which we have been doing for a couple of years. There is a lack of good research based institutes in Hong Kong, and there is no culture for research. The general mindset has to be changed.

TK: It is the vicious cycle, where speed and efficiency are valued most before anything else. The culture or mentality is not quite there yet to nurture this kind of slow process in conducting research.

RC: Is this the real reason behind the backward architectural practice in Hong Kong? Signature foreign architects had collaborated with local architects, but I have heard that they do not really have a big input in research. I think there is a tendency for more and more foreign architects to join in the local market of architecture. In old days, they would only import architects from overseas for some commercial buildings, but now, strangely enough, they collaborate with foreigners in almost every building, commercial and residential.

VN: From my working with these signature architects, I do not really understand the point about having a very strong research base to produce quality work. However, projects by ‘star architects’ are evidently expensive. The argument here is that there is definitely a cheaper way to build, but it would be more expensive to achieve the same quality result.

LL: There is another question embedded in that comment: as Hong Kong citizens how much do we really care about our city? As local practicing architects, when we work with international architects, how much do we really want them to be culturally sensitive like us, as they may bring something new to the city due to their foreignness? Is that a good or bad thing in the end? You have to look at it both ways. But I still think that resulting quality whether local or not has to be the final judge.

DC: Just to wrap up, if you are going to give a recommendation to the government on how they should promote Hong Kong creativity, especially in architectural design, what would that be? Because there are a lot of infrastructure projects coming up, and they tend to use the traditional procurement method with engineer-lead team with or without international or local architect’s meaningful participation.

VN: The government should give Hong Kong architects space to create, starting off with small competition projects. They have to change their procurement method, and have more frequent competitions instead of one single project. You cannot promote architecture just by telling people how good it is. People need to see completed work and be enlightened by it.

BL: Having small-scale projects for design competitions would be a good start. These are low-risk and the government can still afford it even if they go bad. Recently HKIA arranged a design competition with ASD and HK Tourism Board for the Tsim Sha Tsui Plaza, but in the end the winning project cannot be implemented due to political pressure and fall out.

LL: I agree partly with smaller projects to encourage young emerging practices. In Singapore, there are smaller budget projects allocated, through Government organizations equivalent to our ASD, HA, SWD. Three award-winning young Singaporean practices told me that they had gained recognition by designing small SGD 10 million buildings, and now they design at SGD100 million level. I think design has to be encouraged from ground up, smaller projects have to be there. Like in Shenzhen ‘new blood’ design architects are nurtured and given opportunities to shortlist in public tender competitions, otherwise these kind of design practices would eventually die off, and only a few big firms will remain.

VN: A final point is on our public housing. Public housing will dominate our cityscape very much with increasing quantity, so we should ask for more innovation. Singapore has been doing this for over twenty years with much variation in their public housing, so Hong Kong needs to strengthen our promoting in creativity.
While it could never have been predicted when the firm was started, over the last 50 years Leigh & Orange has developed a thorough understanding of the design of facilities for horses and equine related typologies.

Leigh & Orange has gained experience in equine design through its multiple commissions and this experience is now displayed through the completion of one of the world’s leading centres of equestrianism.

From this grounding in racecourse design, Leigh & Orange was commissioned in the 1970s by the Hong Kong Jockey Club to undertake a complete racecourse on newly reclaimed land at Shatin. This was designed and built at breakneck speed and, when opened, was immediately recognized as one of the finest racecourses in the world.

This led to recognition at an international level, and to Leigh & Orange being asked to consult on racecourses across the world ranging from Ascot in England to Perth in Australia, from 2006 All China National Games in Nanjing to the King Abdulaziz Racecourse built in the desert outside of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia.

The journey towards international equine design moves on, with Leigh & Orange’s recent completion of the Al Shaqab Equestrian Performance Arena in Qatar in 2011. Developed by Qatar Foundation, Al Shaqab is an 800,000sqm equestrian academy in Doha dedicated to the advancement of a world class and unequalled show horse breeding and training facilities for the Middle East and the wider world.

Inspired by traditional desert architecture, the facility establishes a grand inner precinct for stables. Thirty four meters high, 236x137m performance arena which is the focal point of the facility accommodates 7000 spectators with an extended capacity of 10,000. Exploring the boundaries of design innovation, performance lighting for the external area is integrated into the 850m aerofoil roof perimeter obviating the need for traditional high mast solutions.
The design was validated through computer modelling, Life Cycle Assessment and value engineering achieving significant cost benefits in the roof structure design. The low double vault of the roof design increases the structural and operational efficiency whilst reducing the overall load transferred to the foundations, and reduces energy and material consumption. Due to the large volume of the indoor arena, a stratification HVAC system was used to achieve acceptable indoor comfort levels without waste of energy.

The design intent integrates natural split-faced stone to the lower levels, to establish a visually heavier base with metal and glass panels above to create light, proportionally thinner roofs which relate to the sky. Orientated approximately north-south and shielded by the roof, clear glass IGUs on the facades is adequate to optimize energy efficiency. Low iron glass fins support the grandstand glazing minimizing visual obstruction. Skylights with diffuser assemblies provide filtered light to both the warm-up and indoor arenas thus reducing artificial light dependency.

With its excellent design, Al Shaqab Equestrian Performance Arena has won many highly acclaimed architectural awards including 2012 Quality Building Awards – Quality Award, Grand Award for Project Outside Hong Kong (Non Residential), 2012 HKIE & IStructE Structural Excellence Award, 2011 World Architecture Festival Award Shortlisted Project, 2011 Cityscape Awards Architecture in the Emerging Markets “Highly Commended Seal of Distinction” Award, 2011 Overall Project of the Year at the Middle East Architect Awards Shortlisted Project and 2011 Arab Investment Summit – The Leader in Interior Design.

Now Leigh & Orange’s innovation and design experience in equine design has been widely recognized for its continue success in building the worlds’ leading centres of equestrianism. The Al Shaqab Academy is now providing a grand inner precinct for the Emir’s stables and a large performance arena that will continue to bring excitement and communal experience to all visitors for many years to come.
Expressing the Ethos of the City University in a Timeless Manner

Run Run Shaw Creative Media Centre

Leigh & Orange Ltd

With the completion of the Run Run Shaw Creative Media Centre (CMC) at the City University of Hong Kong in 2010, Leigh & Orange enables the University to offer an academic building that expresses the ethos of the institution in providing education in the creative media field. The distinctive design creates an extraordinary range of spaces rich in form, light, and material that, together, create an interactive environment for research and teaching of creativity and innovation. The apparently complex building form was conceived as a regeneration of the small hill that once stood on the site for millions of years. The building’s final shape was concluded after a hundred rounds of explorations looking into the interactions and overlapping of the pure geometries found in the depth of the earth. Internal activity spaces, with its dramatic sequencing, have been designed specifically to encourage collaboration through openness and connectivity. Secluded landscaped gardens to the north of the building are available for students and the general public alike.

The Design Philosophy

Designed by the world renowned architect Studio Daniel Libeskind in association with Leigh & Orange, Creative Media Centre is a specific response to unique qualities of the site and the client’s
aspirations to create a landmark building for this specialist and creative education stream. The design concept relates volumetric components of the building to human senses which are intended to stimulate activities pertaining to such creative Faculties.

This 23,700 sqm facility was completed in November 2010 in the premises of City University of Hong Kong to house The School of Creative Media, Department of Media and Communication, Department of Computer Science, The Centre for Applied Computing and Interactive Media, Department of English and Architectural Studio for Division of Building Science & Technology.

The distinct and sculptural form of the building is a statement signifying CMC’s presence not only within the university campus but also in the area. The spine of the building “university stairs” is accentuated by the highest volume penetrating through the rest of the mass. The volume of this nine-storey building is toned down through dynamic play of interlocking and inclined volumes also facilitating day light penetration into the building through skylights and punch-hole windows created on planes. Exterior roof terraces on L8 and L9 act as the culmination of a path continuing vertically from the event plaza at the ground floor into the building through the exhibition areas to the roof via the University Stair. The path is a vertical terminus of the link to the main campus.
**Vertical Circulation**

The main central staircase is an important architectural feature inside the building. This University Stair provides vertical connection from ground floor to all floor Accommodations. The spinal core contains vertical circulation means through lifts or the continuous inter-floor “University Stair”. These are centrally placed within the building as a whole offering good and legible accessibility. The University Stair is continuing vertically from the main entrance into the event lobby on L1, the Exhibition Areas on L3 and out onto roof gardens on L8 and L9. The entire stair itself is a cantilevered structure from the floor slab of each level.

**Futuristic and Versatile**

The design integrates flexible provisions such as sufficient ceiling heights to enable a range of uses, wide structural grids, and reliance on a central core for lateral load resistance, and structural floor system that accommodates a number of mechanical and electrical service distribution schemes.

Classrooms are divided through soft partitions to enhance spatial flexibility. Besides, other provisions such as use of large grid floor plan, spaces designed for loose fit rather than tight fit, inclusion of multifunctional spaces, and design that allows interior fitting-out to use modular and pre-fabricated components. Materials are regional and local that robust and resilient to environmental conditions. CMC is a versatile and a futuristic building which has greater potential for alternative uses such as a convention centre, museum, entertainment venue, media or broadcasting hub. The iconic nature of the building will also maintain its attractiveness and high profile timelessly.

**Merging with the Exciting Landscape**

The facility was designed on an existing vegetative slope in between Cornwall road and student hostels of the City University of Hong Kong. The landscape retained part of exiting vegetation which consists of native plants, and compensated with less water intensive or native plants for the