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HOSPITALITY & SERVICES

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When creation and business compliment by design

By Leo Boon Yeow



Sim Boon Yang, founder-director of Eco.id.

hospitality projects.

Being responsible for some of Eco.id's more prominent local projects - from the Naumi Hotel at Seah Street, to the Hamilton Scotts at Scotts Road - Sim knows all too well the difficulties of melding his artistic aspirations together with the art of making money for a sustainable business.

Sustainable architecture as a sustainable business

To most, a home or office unit is basically four walls.

But exposed to one of Sim's creations, emotions can be evoked by just four walls or in some cases, there isn't even one wall.

To understand the business that is Eco.id, one must first understand the art of Sim Boon Yang and Eco.id's co-founder, Calvin Sim, who turn building challenges into innovative designs.

Sim's current project involves a resort that's yet to be built on one of Indonesia's many small islands.

The location is only accessible by seaplane, a remoteness that Sim capitalised on with an innovative solution that not only solves the problem of building in such an exotic location, but also adheres to the company's eco policies.

"You don't go and put a Balinese or Maldivian hut there.

"So the idea is we are going to put a tented concept... where we design, build and flat-pack the tents in Singapore and Indonesia, put it on a barge and erect it on-site," he said.

"This design is all about evoking the basic Boy Scout instinct in all of us. Everything can be closed and packed to go immediately," said Sim, making it all seem so simple and logical.

Through such projects it's easy to see where the eco in Eco.id came from.

"Sustainability in our design is something we do a lot of because our projects are very often in very sensitive sites."

"It's not just about getting the Greenmark award," he said, hinting that it was boring to just pin sustainability on a checklist.

"To laymen, they will think 'what's the big deal?', even if the checkboxes are ticked," said Sim who clearly walks the talk.

"To me this issue is emotive. The idea of sustainable design eventually as a product must be emotionally connected with the lay person."

Incorporating modern technological advancements like water renewal, solar powered vehicles, and other ideas that reduce a development's impact on the environment are some of the things that Eco.id wants to do without being forced into what is a standard concept for sustainability.

Being one not to be placed in a box or to offer solutions out of a box may seem like a business no-no

Creativity is an asset that some say only a privileged few possess. Just like any asset, creativity needs to be managed properly, and more so when your entire business model revolves around it.

The constant hurdle that plagues aspiring entrepreneurs in the creative field is the inability to strike a balance between their creative desires and financial needs.

Founder-director of Eco.id, Sim Boon Yang, not only successfully manages art and business, he's also turned Eco.id into one of Singapore's most sought after architectural firms for high-end residential and

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Wilsin Office Furniture says its newly-launched "Deskspace" solution can help companies save money by helping them re-use 70 per cent of its components.



A Successful Thought

As an initiative first started to plug a gap in Singapore's education system, the School of Thought has since blossomed into a successful business to reach further than a student's report books.

as it's too niche.

Still, Sim makes it work.

Providing solutions to tricky eco problems to complement his designs are just a small part of what he has to deal with in a project. Sometimes they even take a back seat.

Advantages of deviating from the norm

"In our type of business, there are a lot of moving parts - multiple key players, and many things go wrong all the time.

Sim's tip, "the trick is how you have the kind of leadership to helm something like this to completion and deal with these issues all the time".

Management and design may seem like chalk and cheese, but juggling design nuances, as well as dealing with everything from a unique budget to logistic issues that come with each project, make it challenging and enjoyable for Sim.

The lesson learnt was really, just having absolute clarity in what you do best, and being able to secure work, and ensuring you have decent cash-flow to ensure the whole thing is viable.

Of course, the stereotypical designer "wilfulness" that can be detrimental to creative businesses does appear from time to time, but it may not be a bad thing Sim concedes.

It's part of the reason why Eco.id's two directors keep interaction with other architects to a minimum, not out of disrespect, but to take a break from work and to find inspiration.

"We're both very active, and we're in sports a lot. I experiment with experiences and travelling a lot, because those are real draws for the kind of work we do," Sim explained.

"And I think that goes partly into the why we seem to do this type of work well and easily," he added.

At the same time, being creative doesn't mean getting carried away with experimentation. A complete freehand is not a reality of Eco.id's existence.

"Our projects are now very serious and very large, and we cannot afford to be too wilful all the way. You balance that with actual work that goes on," he said.

And the "actual work" is something that provides a distinct difference between architectural design and a successful architectural design business.

Once commissioned to design fully functional buildings that match a client's vision, Eco.id improvises only for added value to a project.

To do that, Sim perfects the ability to understand branding and marketing concepts in order to create "high visibility assets for clients."

"We try to understand the market context, the competitors out there, and the client's brand aspirations. So that the building, in some ways, reflect a bit of the client's personality, and I like that," he said.

In order to create the best value for his clients, Sim admits that sometimes it is necessary for an architectural firm to "brainstorm almost like an ad agency, overlapping with architecture, interior design and business ideas."

Sim revealed, "I think it's that thinking that had given us quite a lot of success with big clients."

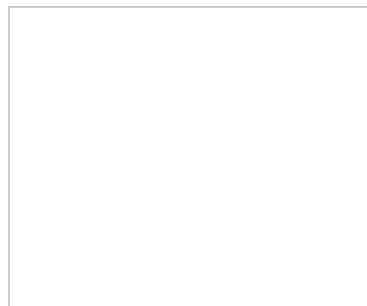
While dealing with big clients may assure a successful business, Eco.id makes sure that its reputation and quality of work is also maintained.

Natural selection as protection

One of the most important selection criteria that helps Eco.id maintain its quality and reputation, is the compatibility between client and designer.

With each project undertaken by Eco.id being vastly different from each other, an initial session is always held to discover the client's personality and vision.

Sim usually prefers talking in a relaxed setting - choosing drinks in a bar over a high-powered boardroom meeting - so he can reliably establish whether or not client and company are in sync and ready to do business.



Books and literature are a major source of inspiration at Eco.id.

"Let me tell you, most property clients are people with a strong vision, and a very strong personality. And if you can listen, and hear them out, and understand what they are about, it makes for a very nice working relationship," said Sim.

The result of that initial discovery, oftentimes produces award-winning structures, such as the latest addition to Singapore's crowded cityscape, the aesthetically-pleasing and yet eco-friendly Naumi Hotel, which won the 2008 President's Design Award.

But of course, discovering the client is not without its own pitfalls. Sim warns: "The reality is like dating. They are out to impress you."

That's where the businessman takes over from the artist.



Entrepreneur at 70

With a 50 year career that included opening Singapore's first 7-11 branch in Geylang, Ronald Ang is anything but ready to slow down - even at the age of 70.

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"In the past we had some really terrible clients, where you're not in sync, work was unpleasant and un-enjoyable and they don't pay, and you have to send them lawyer letters to get paid," Sim recalled with a thankful look of a wiser man.

Aside from studying the project, it's also important to evaluate if the client is "a serious player, and if is a healthy payer," said Sim of his role in sustaining business for Eco.id.

"We are past the stage where we go 'I think this job will be nice to do. Let's do this job.'

"You have to learn to let go of some things. There are jobs that are lovely to do, but a bit 'lifty', "Sim said of projects that he's declined as they may not pay on time, or the fee is too low to make it worthwhile.

He feels that it is one of the more important things he and his partner look out for because a practice with about 100 staff, along with offices in China, Singapore and Bangkok, can ill afford to take on jobs that will adversely affect its cash flow.

Such projects could in turn affect the core resources and ability of Eco.id to properly service other paying clients.

Sim learnt this lesson the hard way, viewing creativity over cash as a phenomenon that plagued him when he was starting out. It's also an issue being grappled with by fellow architectural practitioners today.

"In the early years we were a bit naïve... (and) trusting," said Sim of the generally forgiving and relaxed outlook in the creative industry towards payment issues, because it seems tedious and probably not as "fun".

"I think as we grew, we put together a very good admin system to invoice and collect in a very disciplined way" the architect reflected.

"So that (when) people don't pay, we stop work. We don't spend a lot of man hours doing work that we weren't being paid for".

The discipline seems to have paid off.

"I'm very proud to say that in the last two big [financial] dips, and the recent one, we had never laid anybody off [or] cut anybody's pay," Sim said of the simple, hard-line but fundamentally crucial policy.

Apart from paying clients, what contributes to a thriving creative business, is the type of projects that are undertaken.

After more than 10 years in the business, Eco.id primarily goes after niche projects that have a higher inherent value with the business made up of high-end residential (40 per cent) and hotel (60 per cent) projects.

To Sim, it is a value versus effort, balancing act that Eco.id was built to take on.

Given its current size, Eco.id is optimal to take on high-end niche projects, rather than one large medium-cost development.

The reason is because such projects represent less risk when they are spread out, and the quality of work can be maintained.

A business plan, napkins and clarity

Sim, who was formally trained in architecture in the US and UK, started practising in London, right after graduation.

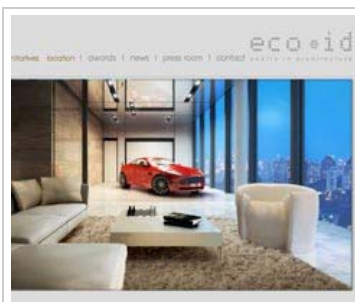
After four years as a qualified architect, he re-evaluated his choice of location during an unexpected visit back to Singapore in 1991.

"Asia was taking off in the early 90s. I stayed on and the opportunities were here, and it was a good time to set up at that point," he said.

Being at the cusp of his career, Sim decided to return to his roots to be professionally acquainted with Singapore's architectural landscape, while also embarking on a year-long travelling expedition overland to seek inspiration.

After that, it was time to start out.

"The process of starting up is always one of non-clarity. You can only go as far as saying, 'Okay I think I've got enough money to tide me over for three months, I've got a couple of new jobs,' small things that you start off with that is going to be secure enough to look after cash flow," said Sim.



The Hamilton Scotts, one of Sim's most prominent creations in Singapore as seen on Eco.id's website.

What's important though, is to find the right people to work with.

"In terms of business, the right partner in terms of fit, compatibility or vision and compatibility of personality are pretty essential elements that very often cause a lot of problems for many companies," he said.

The choice fell on Calvin Sim, a friend during National Service who later became his classmate in the US.

Sim acknowledged that their "type of shared past was an important criteria to go into an incorporated

company together". It also allowed Eco.id's business plan to be nonchalantly scribbled on a back of a napkin.

Although the directors are alike, Sim concedes they also think differently, which ultimately forms a "comfortable fit in that difference, which is critical."

"It is good to have someone to sound out everything, from a business issue to decisions or design," he said.

Just like most start-ups, Eco.id began in 1996 with as little costs as possible, with the office set up in his partner's basement to avoid taking out loans

Sim, who had already quit his earlier job to set things in motion, spent what little funds they had to secure some furniture and design equipment. The other partner in the firm kept his day job for a further six months just to be sure they had a good but gentle start.

"I think in our case because we started in such a gradual fashion, there wasn't a lot of pain to be honest," said the 48-year-old.

The practice worked by "just being extremely dedicated, jumping right in to the dark, and working extremely hard in those early days," Sim said.

"The lesson learnt was really, just having absolute clarity in what you do best, and being able to secure work, and ensuring you have decent cash-flow to ensure the whole thing is viable."

With Sim once again highlighting cash-flow as a contributing factor to the demise of many young firms, it is worth to take note.

"I think a lot of businesses fail not because of reasons like talent, but management [of] cash-flow, a naivety about 'Oh, people will pay me on time.

"But that is never the case," Sim said with a good natured, but subdued laugh, a sure sign that he is talking through experience.

A successful run of 15 years, two economic crises and multiple challenges later Eco.id is still growing strong, but Sim let on briefly that he misses the early days when the office environment was less corporate and more family oriented.

It was also during those days that Sim and his partner produced their most memorable work, which hold tremendous emotional value.

The partners are particularly proud of a pair of shophouses - one in Geylang and the other in Spottiswoode Park - which, were originally meant to be their offices.

The company size eventually simply did not allow them to use the premises but the beautifully crafted properties, created on shoestring budgets, serve as constant reminders "of how to do things well."

Growth from within

Thanks to those reminders, and the guidance that Sim and his partner has given Eco.id, the firm has projects piled so high the partners have found it imperative to have strict protocols and procedures to maintain the health of the company even while they aren't around.

"We are very process driven in the way we do our work. From design all the way to construction. So we need systems in place.

"We are about to be ISO registered for all our sub-groups basically. And ISO systems are such that you have to maintain audit of the way you operate by third parties," Sim said.

A well run-company that offers administrative interactions with clients and partners transactions that are quick and painless also invites attention from various businesses keen to acquire hotel specialist arms.



The Naumi Hotel won the 2008 President's Design Award among many others.

"We had kept fairly disinterested because we don't think we want to, but that possibility is always there," Sim said while adding that Eco.id is not like any other business.

"Unlike any other business where that would have been the goal, where you exit and cash out early on," he said while pointing out that a buyout scenario involving a company built around two partners is not an easy task.

"It's not a commodity. It's a service that a lot of subtleties and complexity that people want to tap your brains on," he said.

The focus ahead for Eco.id is more organic, with Sim aiming to groom the next generation of senior

associates that could eventually be co-directors.

"We do that very selectively according our high standards, or to bring in partners who have the right skill-sets that are compatible, to help the company grow.

"Our expectation of quality by staff down-line is very critical. You delegate things down and expect people to be competent - it's very important," he said.

To achieve that, Sim openly encourages his staff to take control, while he and his partner to take a step back to concentrate on other new projects.

There are some on the team who have proven themselves but while the wheels have been set in motion, Sim still feels that it is too early to fully take a step back and let the company run on its own.

"From a business point of view, we should at least have a ten year horizon in terms of us being active and involved.

"Our type of work has a lot of longevity to it. We are [in] a very late-blooming type of profession. We get better with age," Sim said with a rare but warm brief smile.

Fortunately, the founding directors of Eco.id were early-bloomers in making a business financially sound.



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