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## NEW HORIZON

YOUNG INDONESIANS  
SCALE THE HEIGHTS OF  
MODERN STYLE

**ASIA ABROAD**  
IT'S A NEW WORLD  
AND ASIAN  
DESIGNERS ARE AT  
THE HEART OF IT

**ASIA IN VENICE**  
GRASSROOTS  
ARCHITECTURE IS  
THE STAR AT THIS  
YEAR'S  
ARCHITECTURE  
BIENNALE

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# BEYOND SINGAPORE

FEW PLACES ARE AS WELL-POISED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF GLOBALISATION AS THE AMBITIOUS, MULTICULTURAL CITY-STATE. THE DESIGN WORLD HAS TAKEN NOTE.

WORDS ALICE DAVIS

The movement of people shaped the course of human evolution and history, as networks of migrants have enriched their new communities, sharing skills and goods and ideas, like Phoenician traders did millennia before. This need to explore is perhaps innate in some people. This issue, we seek out the modern-day adventurers, some of the best Asian design talents who are making their mark overseas.

While many venture abroad in search of new experiences, better opportunities, to discover new people, new cultures and so on, there are some pockets of the globe where the world is already at the doorstep. Singapore is one of these places, renowned for its multiculturalism, multilingualism and long history of immigration and merchant trading. Its close proximity and ease of access to so many other nations alongside the roles it plays connecting east with west and as an international entrepôt make Singapore a global location, culturally, linguistically,

commercially, economically and geographically. Now Singapore is becoming a global design hub too.

Singapore's increasing presence on the world design and architecture stage is in part due to the international vision of the firms based here. DP Architects, WOHA, Ministry of Design and Architects 61 are examples of local firms with a regional to global presence. Although many of their designers and architects have studied or worked elsewhere, they returned or moved to Singapore to set up their practices or forge their careers, evidence of Singapore's draw for locals and foreigners alike. Such was the case for Sim Boon Yang, co-founder of Eco Id, an architecture firm celebrated for its progressive hotel and high-rise architecture.

"Working professionally in London was very liberating," he says. "London was an emerging European city, thriving artistically during the mid-80s to early 90s. Being in that environment played

an important influence in my development, not only professionally, but mentally and spiritually as well. Returning after eight years living abroad felt like a logical homecoming. Back then I already had a sense of Singapore's potential growth."

At the reputed architecture firm WOW, established in 2000 by Wong Chiu Man and Maria Warner Wong, it was the intercontinental scope of the firms they worked for previously, where they had the chance to do projects in other countries, that they were inspired to replicate in Singapore. "These projects exposed us to different cultures and business environments and taught us the importance of great communication, client relations and world-class professional services," Warner Wong says. WOW has since then built a reputation for the works it has carried out abroad. "The projects we have span from Tanzania to Cebu and many places in between. We have won awards



(FROM LEFT) The master plan of Al Baraa complex in Dubai, proposed by WOW in 2008; Vvanta by Taj in Whitefield, India won multiple awards for WOW at the 2010 Singapore Institute of Architects Design Awards.



(THIS PAGE, FROM TOP)  
Assunta chair by Lanzavecchia  
and Wai; Arbor Desk by Out  
of Stock.

(OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT) Sim Boon  
Yang, co-founder of Eco Id;  
Wong Chiu Man and Maria  
Warner Wong, founders of  
WOW Architects; Francesca  
Lanzavecchia and Hunn Wai;  
The designers behind Out  
of Stock, Gabriel Tan, Wendy  
Chua, Gustavo Maggio and  
Sebastián Alberdi.





in Europe, Singapore and India for our international work," she says.

Meanwhile, the young Singaporean designer Hunn Wai, whose firm Lanzavecchia and Wai straddles Milan and Singapore, made a conscious decision to study abroad. "Going to and residing in a foreign land always encourages introspection," he says of his studies in Eindhoven, where he met his partner Francesca Lanzavecchia. When the pair graduated, Wai and Lanzavecchia were already causing ripples in the Netherlands, Milan and elsewhere. These positive reactions "gave us the confidence and conviction to operate and grow our studio," he says.

This global reach is not something that just happens. Experiences are important in helping architects and designers build an understanding of consumers and markets overseas, and eventually in formulating a sort of global outlook, or universal understanding, that gives their brand appeal beyond borders. "This is a great pairing with my partner Francesca, who is based in Milan, because the result is a pretty much international worldview on markets, trends and cultures," says Wai. "We use our differences in cultures, values and localities to spark and feed projects, and thus far this has worked wonderfully."

Another young design firm with an inherently global feel is Out of Stock. Its four multinational members, from Singapore, Argentina and Spain, have all spent time abroad, and actually met in Sweden. Wendy Chua, from Singapore, puts it this way: "Without travelling, there would be no Out of Stock." Chua embraces the possibilities that globalisation and technology offer, saying the internet and programmes like Skype have



transformed how people collaborate and do business. "We work with craftsmen in Argentina, Germany, Malaysia and Singapore," she says. "We visited artisans in Kyoto and Shiga. Our roots in such varied cultures have removed the boundaries in the way we work so we never feel we are trapped in a particular city or with limited resources."

At Eco id, more of two-thirds of whose portfolio is outside Singapore, attention from overseas began with the Metropolitan in Bangkok and has grown

ever since. "This came about from our willingness to meet with potential clients overseas, exploring potential projects in the region often leading to commissioned works. We foresaw ourselves engaging clients beyond Singapore, hence our active projects in the region," Sim says.

So, what exactly motivates overseas clients to hire from Singapore? It would be more natural and maybe more cost effective, some might say, to look up a local architect, designer or master planner. WOW's Warner Wong says it does make good business sense. "We are experienced in cross-border services. We know the market, we know the competition and we are experts in developing brand design guidelines." Singapore is an especially good base for that kind of thing, says Wendy Chua. "The infrastructure here makes it easier to set up your own business. Despite our current economic recession, the design industry here remains vibrant and thriving."

That doesn't mean restricting their offices to Singapore's borders, however. "Singapore is a thriving magnet for talent," says Warner Wong. "We have considered opening offices in other cities like Shanghai and Manila, and we plan to do so. We also rely on a strong network of associated consultant firms in India, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. This is essential to building a world-class firm and great projects."

At Lanzavecchia and Wai and Out of Stock, things are done on a far smaller scale, but their appeal across continents is also evident. Lanzavecchia and Wai's designs have been bought by a US museum, they have recently been commissioned by luxury material maker Alcantara and major Italian furniture brands and have in the past designed for the Mercedes-Benz Home Collection and Samsonite in



The Metropolitan Hotel in Thailand by Eco Id won several awards in 2007.

Milan. In June, *Newsweek* named them "Designers of the Future." Out of Stock have had designs produced by Ligne Roset in France, Environment in the US, Foundry in Singapore, Bolia in Denmark, Discipline in Italy and Scanteak in Singapore and Japan.

These four firms all share something special. Not all design, architecture or art has the capability to transcend culture and nationality. Indeed much of it is by its definition so subjective that its reach is limited from conception. But this is the era of globalisation, of instant knowledge and vast and intricate social networks and connections. To communicate with an international audience is for some necessitated by the times we live in. Sim believes Singaporean architects are increasingly known for an aesthetic that does appeal beyond borders, "a modernist and forward-thinking approach to design, and also effective

communication, which allows rapport with clients – building relations plays an important part in success as well."

Like Out of Stock, both WOW and Lanzavecchia and Wai are helped by their collaboration and interaction with people from other cultures. And this in many ways is what people seek when they move abroad to work, be it from Asia to Europe, Europe to the Americas, or the Americas to Asia. Wai, when asked what gives their brand such wide appeal, says: "We would like to think that it is due to the international positioning of our studio and very personal approaches and opinions on contemporary issues, which seem to strike a chord with our clients, media and audience."

Warner Wong mentioned the draw Singapore has for international talent and the work they do

alongside associate companies abroad, but she fears this may not remain the case. "We have a great work force, supportive government and the Singapore brand is a big draw for overseas clients," but recent limitations imposed on foreign talent have taken a toll on their business. For WOW, the problem is serious. An internationally minded firm like this relies on the hugely varied skill sets of a multinational staff and needs to nurture its universal perspective if it is to grow. "The restrictions imposed threaten to put an end to the ideal workplace," she says, "and unless we can continue to build a strong international team with diverse cultures and talents, we will be forced to take the business overseas."

That said, beyond immigration politics, Singapore appears to be on the road to its goal of becoming an international design capital. Events like the World Architecture Festival and 100% Design Singapore are to the city-state's credit and, as Wai points out, there is a multitude of government policies, funding and scholarships directed at encouraging young people to follow a design path. Still, Warner Wong has some reservations. "The competitive landscape is very challenging," she says. "We have a long way to go in becoming a regional design leader. I think Shanghai is definitely a more innovative and global city for design and architecture. With the rapid development of China and India, Singapore has to keep up its innovation and professional development or risk being left behind."

Sim believes Singapore has changed a great deal in the past five years. "There is a growth in culture, a more relaxed attitude and a focus on creative disciplines. Also, Singapore's inherent wealth creates potential opportunities for projects, providing the younger generation of architects with choices to explore." Chua too sees the emerging design industry heightening local knowledge and appreciation of art and culture, though she believes this revolution needs longer to ferment.

On the whole, though, Singapore's resources, dynamism, economy and multiculturalism are seen as winning strengths that will doubtless continue to impress on a local, regional and international stage, potentially helping the city-state to secure its place at the heart of the design and architecture industries. "We believe Singapore can be the capital of Southeast Asia with its stability, vibrancy, drive and ambition, on top of its established position as a hub for exchange," Wai says. [ecoid.com](http://ecoid.com), [lanzavecchia-wai.com](http://lanzavecchia-wai.com), [outofstockdesign.com](http://outofstockdesign.com), [wow.sg](http://wow.sg) **S**