

Design with Nature: Putting Empathy into Architecture

Ching-Hwa Chang

Founding Partner at Bio-architecture Formosana (Chinese Taipei)

The aspirations to become an architect

Born and raised in Tainan, Ching-Hwa Chang describes her family as “a typical civil servant household.” At that time, women were expected to play their traditional role in the society such as following the “three

obediences and four virtues.” However, she longed for a challenging career. To break the gender stereotype, Ching-Hwa determined to jump out of the comfort zone and committed herself to the industry of architecture, a field where women were a minority.

After graduating from university, Ching-Hwa experienced the larger scale of urban



related planning and renewal projects as a research assistant in Taiwan University. In the past, people undervalued the need of protecting and preserving cultural heritages. It's because of the urban renewal that people started to become aware of the importance of the preservation of historic architectures. From the incident, Ching-Hwa realized that every individual can make contribution to the world if they can take their own responsibility. From the perspective of architects, they are capable of making influential decisions and contributions to society. It motivated Ching-Hwa to study adrinled architecture abroad.

Ching-Hwa's studies in the USA taught her the significance of green energy in the environment related design. She was inspired by the concept of "design with nature" and passive houses advocated by professor in University of Pennsylvania, and became more conscious of the importance of ecology. The learning experience reminded Ching-Hwa of a core responsibility of architects: Design for peaceful coexistence with nature.

The philosophy of architecture: to improve people's daily lives

As an architect, Ching-Hwa believes that architecture encourages the environmental value and enhances lives. Architecture is a combination of art, design, and engineering. Because the process of creating and designing relies heavily on logical thinking, it is imperative that architects learn to embrace a myriad of challenges every day.

The architectural philosophy of improving people's daily lives motivates Ching-Hwa to pursue her career as a green architect. Everyone needs to deal with various challenges at workplace, and so do architects. Ching-Hwa holds the belief that we all experience life differently, so what architects should do is to envision a wide range of styles of living and design buildings to fulfill the diverse needs of the users. For instance, architects need to come up with the design of specific buildings such as nursery homes, kindergartens, schools

and hospitals even though they don't have the living experiences. These buildings play essential roles for humans from cradle to grave, which make our lives more convenient and enrich our lives. As a result, architects are required to imagine various ways of living in the process of designing.

Moreover, due to the advance of technology, the living environment has changed a lot than what people went through in the past. Apart from taking people's basic need into consideration, architects should also think of how to make a connection between the users and the outside world. Instead of designing a confined environment, architects need to consider whether the living space can help users maintain social connectedness and experience sensory stimulation. Therefore, architects should recognize the personality and the needs of users while designing.

The belief in making positive impacts on the society

Keeping in mind her belief that architects should make positive contributions to society

and shoulder social responsibility, Ching-Hwa has participated in many infrastructure plans since returning to her homeland. From her point of view, the purpose of infrastructure is to serve people and make people live their lives efficiently. When Ching-Hwa was responsible for designing Beitou Library, the initial concept was to create a harmonious environment and encourage people to read. Ching-Hwa also shared another renewal plan of infrastructure, Miao Li Station, with us. She hopes the station can become an icon of Miao Li County, a place that makes tourists feel back home, and attract visitors to visit Miao Li County again. The whole team decided to use the pattern of traditional Hakka printed cloth as the background of the station. They also integrated the concept of "unity and interaction" in the design process. Ching-Hwa expects the station to be able to give citizens a place to interact with each other and connect to the world, which can bring positive effects to the society.

"Mother earth treats human beings equally. Overexploiting natural resources will only lead to a devastating outcome for all of us." Ching-Hwa wants to encourage all architects to think about how architecture impacts

nature. Ching-Hwa believes that female architects are able to show more empathy and understanding due to maternal instincts, which is an asset for architectural design. To motivate more female architects to contribute themselves to the industry, Ching-Hwa said that the concept of coexistence with nature should be always be kept in mind. “We want to make the world become a better place and to take environmental issues into consideration. It should be the prime responsibility of a professional architect.”

Personality and profession are the keys, not gender

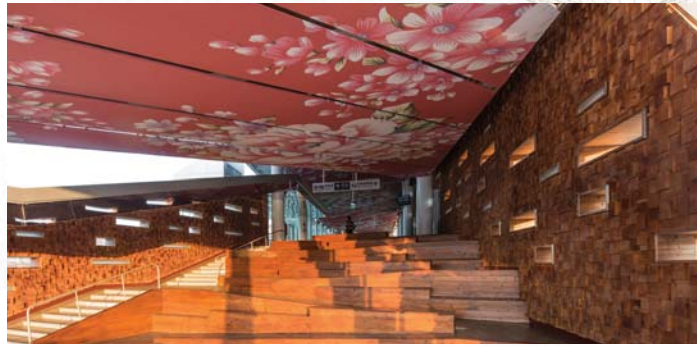
“The policy makers are making efforts to improve gender equality in the workplace,” said Ching-Hwa. She pointed out that most career women have a dilemma where they need to strike a careful balance between family and work.

Luckily, the public sector has implemented many policies to promote women’s rights at work. Specific laws require employers to offer

reasonable time and space accommodations for breastfeeding. They also provide child care subsidies for families with children under 12. Moreover, the competitions of infrastructural designs from architecture offer young and talented architects more opportunities. “These policies have given our female architects a friendlier working environment than in any other country in the Asia-pacific region.”

With regard to Bio-Architecture Formosana, they are a relatively gender-balanced team of over 100 employees. The major difference between the male and female workers’ workload here is that more male employees work at the construction sites while more female employees work in the office.





In the past, only few women determined to join the industry of architecture because they had the responsibility to put more focus on their domestic life. Ching-Hwa said that as a woman, we are born to play various roles. We need to learn how to adapt to the changing roles at the workplace or in the family all the time, which is very challenging for female architects.

Even though there seems to be many obstacles for women to join the architectural field, more and more female students are determined to study in the department of architecture now. The phenomenon shows

that gender is not a major concern for women when they join the architectural sphere. On the contrary, they tend to choose their career based on their own interest.

In addition to some biological differences, Ching-Hwa states that the influential factor of being a professional architect is not gender, but rather one's expertise and personality. Being an architect requires being decisive and undertaking pressures while working in diverse environments. Therefore, how an architect reacts to spontaneous situations in the workplace is more crucial than gender identity.