

Warmer Than an Iron Lady: Ignite Your Career with Her Light of Passion

Tan Pei Ing
Founder of PI Architect (Malaysia)

Public spirit raised and revived

Regarded as Malaysia's Iron Lady of Construction, Tan Pei Ing is not just celebrated for her leadership and contribution in architecture. "Work should not only be work," Pei Ing has also indulged her passion for philanthropy and society over the years.

Confident yet humble as she is, Pei Ing has listed different role models that have positive influence in different phases of her life. For Pei Ing, role models are not always celebrities; they can be those she has closely interacted with. Besides the who's who in architecture like Frank Lloyd Wright, Pei Ing's family also plays a decisive role in what she is now. Pei Ing has not only developed the spirit of perseverance and commitment from her mother and grandmother; her father also



sets her a practical example by involvement in different voluntary organizations. “One chopstick is easily broken while a bundle of chopsticks are not,” Pei Ing continues, “By working collectively as a group, we are able to advocate policies that affect the industry.”

From her family, Pei Ing learns how and why she can contribute to this society. “Architecture,” as she puts it, “is a combination of arts and science. It has the power of shaping the environment we live in and greatly impacting the society.” With determination to be part of that process, Pei Ing has embarked on her career as an architect.

Architecture that lends her voice of conscience

Living in the Asia-Pacific Region that is mostly affected by natural disasters, architects like Pei Ing are characterized by a sedulous attention to the socially responsible architecture for public good. They promote a number of initiatives in disaster management to reduce the impact of disasters. During her term as the ARCASIA president, Pei Ing has successfully introduced the inaugural forums that cover issues from pre- and post-disaster management to cultural heritage

and conservation. To carry out these action plans, Pei Ing has also collaborated with all the subsequent ARCASIA leaders to set up a group of ARCASIA Emergency Architects. With such intensive green involvement, Pei Ing suggests, architects could have gone out of their way to integrate sustainability and resilience into their work.

“Architecture is” Pei Ing defines, “for the community, society and humanity.” Regarding the philosophy of design, Pei Ing assumes that architects should strive to work towards different solutions for the sake of inclusivity, rather than fixing themselves to only one design approach. As Pei Ing sees it, anything fixed is predetermined by ideology. “Architecture itself should be innovative and adaptable to different environments, societies and local cultures,” as Pei Ing states, in a hope that the community can be revitalized with the existing heritage for instance.



Beyond the preconception on women: capability wins out

After accomplishing her study in University of Melbourne, Pei Ing returned to Malaysia in a hard time of global recession. Back to the mid-80s, it seemed tough for any employment, not to mention a female in the male-dominated workplace culture. People tend to overgeneralize their beliefs about women, and thus may have a solid impression on what female architects may seem. Professional though she can be, Pei Ing had difficulty in even getting a job after several many interviews. “Many perceived that ladies are not suitable and incapable of handling rough construction sites.” She finally ended up working in a small-medium architecture firm upon a family friend’s recommendation.

“Don’t fear to convey your thoughts and don’t let rejection hinder your passion,” Pei Ing asserts with a smile of confidence at the struggles she may have been through. “No matter what you do or where you go, never give up and always believe in yourself.” Pei Ing has trained herself to be tough and rising to all challenges in her life. From where Pei Ing stands, challenges make her stronger. Whenever anyone is skeptical if women are

capable enough to do certain things, Pei Ing would set on to prove she could do it better than anyone else.

A crevice we may once fall into unwittingly

“Don’t call me a female architect. Just call me an architect.” Pei Ing continues, “We acquire an equivalent qualification with the same training. We deserve a fair treatment for our capability.”

“During my early years of work,” Pei Ing recounts, “I had encountered gender biases and stereotypes from all sectors of the industry. I had to work a lot harder to prove my capability and earn the respect.” Despite the recent progress towards women’s rights and gender equality, certain characteristics are still ascribed to women in the construction



industry. “Females are thought to be sensitive, adaptable, and detail-oriented, and these characteristics also lead to their better communication and collaborative skills that influence their approach to design.” But for Pei Ing, these are all stereotypes. “Even if we study in the same university or come from the same family, we are all different individuals.”

When these stereotypes are reproduced to the workplace without consciousness, on Pei Ing’s terms, they even facilitate the sexist behaviors such as the pay gap in the labor market, especially in some developed regions where this phenomenon seems least likely to happen. Based on various surveys, Pei Ing says, women still get less pay for the same position. “Generally, women are expected to perform much more unpaid work than men, provide care services for the family members, not to mention child rearing and household chores. The social and cultural norms also stifle women’s progress.”

Standing up for a better right of work: balance, flexibility, advancement

“Never stay quiet; fight for your own right.” Pei Ing encourages us, “Don’t be afraid to take up the challenge, make yourself visible



and heard and do not feel intimidated.” In fact, Pei Ing has carried these mottos out by advocating for gender equity in her whole life. Although men today share a little more housework and childcare, it goes without saying that women still fulfill most obligations of domestic chores or long-term care for other family members. The female role in such day-to-day nurturing and family support can be the outcome of history, as can also be traced in Pei Ing’s refining of the Policy on Gender Equity in Architecture.

Planning on creating an environment that is friendly to female professionals, Pei Ing advises, we should implement work-life balance policies like flexible working arrangements. Maybe the remote work policy rolled out amid the spread of Covid-19 can also be encouraged for the working parents. “Maybe the work-from-home SOP under the lockdown measures of this pandemic

can help in the future,” Pei Ing sees this risk as a chance to overturn the public’s misconception on remote work, which doesn’t necessarily lend itself to productivity.

With a view to continuous growth for female professionals, based on Pei Ing, mentorship programs should be developed as well for the industry. It serves to inspire younger female architects and strengthen their beliefs in success and career advancement by the architectural fraternity in this industry. “We should upgrade ourselves to be competitive and adaptable to changes,” just like what Pei Ing has adhered to in her career and paid it forward to the youth generation. In a word, female professionals should be entitled to choose to come back after their maternal leave, or at any moment when they are ready.

What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger

“My passion for architecture helped me to overcome all these hurdles, and my desire to excel pushed me to persevere. The tough journey has helped me to build my strength and resilience.” Pei Ing indeed sets a positive outlook for the adversities she has overcome. “Understand your strength and weakness. Build on your strength and learn to deal with your weakness,” she motivates us not to be obsessed with any adversity as if it were the last grain of rice. “Embrace our femininity and uniqueness to overcome our self-imposed dogma. Constantly remind ourselves that we are just as capable, if not more in certain areas.”



“Life is not fair, get used to it,” Pei Ing quotes from Bill Gates. “It is true that life is not fair, and the world does not offer a level playing field in all aspects of life.” Pei Ing ends, “Gender inequality is just one of them. So, rather than crying and complaining, love what you do and do great in what you love, and I think success would follow. Most importantly, you stay as a happy person.”