



GORTON'S VISION

In 1999, the Hong Kong-based architectural firm Original Vision, founded by Briton Adrian McCarroll, was chosen to do the master planning, architecture and interior design for Samsara, a cluster of 14 high-end villas on Phuket.

This project, along with the growing amount of work the company was getting on Phuket, sparked a decision in 2003 to set up an office on the island. Architect Stephen Gorton was taken on as a director, to manage the Phuket operation.

Since then the company has gone from strength to strength, to the point where nowadays, Gorton says, Original Vision is asked to tender for most of the top jobs on the island. He spoke with Alasdair Forbes about Original Vision and about his own views of the architectural business on Phuket.



Stephen Gorton seems to like islands. After gaining his degree in architecture from the University of Central England and spending six years in the UK gaining experience, in 1990 he flew out to the British Virgin Islands, haven for US tourists and for those who are offended by the idea of paying tax on their hard-earned billions.

For the next 13 years he worked for OBM (BVI) Ltd, becoming a director of the company in 1997, by which time the company had six offices around the Caribbean.

During that time he was involved in the design of nine resorts, eight in the BVI and the ninth in Cozumel, Mexico. He arrived in Phuket five years ago, making a total of 18 years of island life.

Under his stewardship, the architects, planners and designers in the Phuket office of Original Vision (OV) have assembled an impressive portfolio of work, ranging from small, fun jobs such as Liquid Lounge, a bar in Phuket's upmarket Surin Beach area, to huge, complex tasks such as the planning for a community based on Thai Muang Golf Course, just north of Phuket, which will have a five-star and a six-star resort, and a marina – the first on Thailand's Andaman Sea Coast.

The contract was awarded to OV by Richard Li, son of Hong Kong's richest man, Li Ka-shing. Richard Li is himself ranked at 754 in *Forbes* magazine's 2007 list of the world's richest people.

Why did OV decide to set up in Phuket?

We opened the office here to service our projects. That was basically on the back of Samsara, our first major project, for which we also won the award for Best Architects in the 2006 Thailand Property Awards.

We work as a practice – we have eight people here and 20 in the Hong Kong office. We work closely together; we often get clients coming through from Hong Kong for projects in Thailand, so the project is designed in Hong Kong and we ensure it get built to the designs.

Also, we get commissions that we design here. Everything that's designed here goes back to Hong Kong for review, so that whatever is produced is not from [individual architects, planners or designers]; it's from OV.

We like to be involved from start to finish. We don't just design and give drawings away because you have to persuade the contractor that what you want done can actually be done, "and by the way guys, this is how you might go about it."

That's the most difficult part of what we do.



Designing, in a sense, is easy. Actually getting it done takes forever. It's the most frustrating part, the most difficult part. But you have to do it, otherwise you wouldn't have the Samsaras, the Alilas and so on.

What we discovered is that the only people [on site] who care about buildings and architecture are the architects.

Is that everywhere, or just here?

It's more prevalent here because you don't have a professional ethos. So we stay in close touch with our projects to the end. It's expensive, but it also means we can keep good clients. It means that we can service clients from overseas because they understand that concept.

The relationship between the architect and contractor can at times be a bit rocky, and sometimes you're at loggerheads. But when it works...

Samsara was a real threshold. We get people who've been to Samsara and say, "Please, can we have something like that?"

There are a lot of high-end projects in Phuket these days. Is it easier now to get contractors to understand the kind of standards you are aiming for?

No. And the finishing is the most difficult thing. Really, the most difficult. The best finishing contractors are all in Bangkok. The floor in our own new office, for example, is not up to standard and we have not accepted it.

Construction quality, craftsmanship and pride in one's work is hard to find here, which I found disappointing when I first came here. [Getting a job done well] is all about persuading contractors that things can be done better and more efficiently.

I think a system of apprenticeship would be a good thing – for example, carpentry skills here [in Phuket] are really not that good.

Do many clients have unrealistic expectations?

It's not so much that what they want to do is unrealistic. Where we do have to temper things a little is when they are probably overdeveloping. It's also sometimes a question of getting them to alter their perceptions.

For example, a lot of clients live in Hong Kong, which climatically is very different from Phuket. There, everyone has air-conditioning, turned up to freezing cold. We'll say, "Well, we can do that. It'll cost you more, but why do you want to do that? This is a beach house; it should be open to the environment."

Sometimes you have to disagree quite openly with the client. Clients who have money and are successful are usually quite strong characters and single-minded in their requirements, so they can be quite hard to persuade.

We might say, "Having a door there is not a good idea, and here's why." They may insist, but nine times out of ten, when they have lived there for a while, they get the door removed. They won't admit you were right, but they will say, "I don't need that door there anymore."

In terms of structure, has the broader availability of materials and technology compared with five years ago made a big difference to what you can achieve?

Yes. This is where working with a good contractor helps. They can bring a lot to the table. By no stretch of the imagination do we know everything. On one project, Casuarina Shores, we're working with a very good project manager. He has a civil engineering background so he

understands formwork and how you can use it. I actually find it very exciting.

What I find even more exciting, with this whole thing of global warming catching up with us, is taking the environments within and around the buildings and using them in the most effective manner. You don't need air conditioning. You just need good airflow and ventilation. We're in a very forgiving, comfortable climate.

We are getting more clients who are more thoughtful about the environment, who want to be "green" or eco-friendly. It means you can try many different things.

We've just done a design exercise on one of our projects, studying the use of solar collectors just for the landscape lighting. Now you've got these LED lights of about one Watt each, there's a tiny requirement for power so with a collector one foot by one foot you can power 40 of these lights.

In the end, the developer decided it was going to be too expensive as a capital cost to put it in. But it was very exciting to see the possibilities.

What percentage of developers want genuinely to do the right thing when it comes to the environment – assuming the costs are not too outrageous?

There are a few conscientious developers. It's about persuasion and conscience. And if we have different perspectives [from the developer], then there's no point in working together. It's very much about getting the right people together. Many clients come to us because they have seen what we can do and they like it.

We still have to compete. But now we are asked to compete.

Are tastes in architecture becoming more sophisticated?

I think people now realise they can get pretty much what they want in Phuket. The people who are buying the properties come from international backgrounds, places like Europe, Hong Kong and Singapore, where you have urban, contemporary, hard-edged, cool architecture.

What we try to do is to be contemporary yet also keep it indigenous as much as possible. For example, the steep roofs you see in parts of the island are actually a design from Central Thailand. The roofs here are flatter. What this does is provide more shade around the outside and it reduces the cost because steep roofs use a lot of structure and covering. So you can respond to the local culture and environment.

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