

THE PEAK INTERVIEW

A SIR, NOT A STAR

Sir Terry Farrell is responsible for some of Hong Kong's best-known landmarks. His work is not yet done, and his fondness for bridging old and new remains the key to his thinking.

STORY **DOMINIQUE AFACAN**
ILLUSTRATION **009**







Icon might be an overused word, but Hong Kong's instantly recognisable Peak Tower warrants the title, no doubt about it. Millions of tourists visit it, snap panoramic photographs from it and congregate at its base, some 396 metres above sea level. For 77-year-old British architect Sir Terry Farrell, creating icons is nothing new – look at London's MI6 headquarters and Charing Cross Station or Shenzhen's KK100 for evidence – but the Peak Tower was one of his first. From humble roots in the UK's northern city of Newcastle, it is down to a series of serendipitous events that he ended up creating landmarks in Hong Kong at all, although architecture was on the cards from the beginning.

"I was good at art," he explains from his London home, a renovated spitfire factory. "I drew and I also liked to organise things. I was interested in more than just art – I wanted to be practical with it too. I made my mind up age about 14 or 15 to be an architect. Life was simpler back then and there weren't that many paths to go down." That decision made him the first member of his family to go into higher education, and he did so with apparent ease, first studying architecture at Newcastle University and then travelling to the US for a post-graduate degree in town planning and architecture. Next, a scholarship took him to study in Japan, after which he flew home via Hong Kong to visit an old university pal. "Cecil Chao Sze-tsung was a classmate of mine, and remains a friend today" Farrell recalls. "He'd gone back to Hong Kong after graduation. Because I knew him, I stopped off there on my way back from Japan and that created my interest in the city." Of course, in the 60s, Hong Kong was a very different place. "There weren't any skyscrapers and the harbour was much wider – the yacht club was an island! I went to the border with China and took photographs of the rice fields. I'm sure I looked towards Shenzhen – and it didn't exist then except as a small fishing village. Now if I stood on that same point, I'd probably see tower blocks, of which we have the tallest one [the 442-metre-high KK100]."

Despite being fresh out of his studies, Farrell made the decision to set up a business almost as soon as he returned from Asia. "I got back to the UK in late 1964 and by January I'd set up a practice. I didn't really work for anyone else. It was quite unusual to begin with such limited experience and it was pretty hair-raising at first. I knew absolutely nothing about the practice of architecture," admits Farrell. "It was a difficult birth. In those days I had quite long hair and casual clothes, and I remember in my first meeting with a contractor, I was asked if my father ran the practice!"

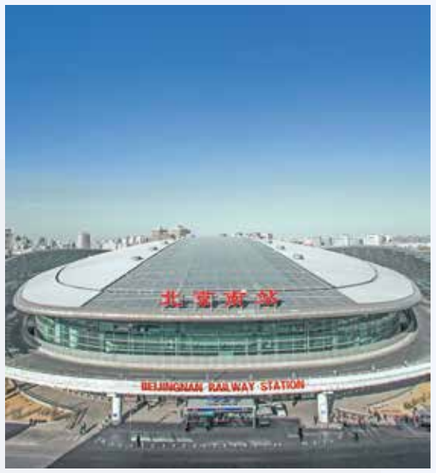
Fast-forward to 1980, with Farrell & Partners going strong and a reassuringly more mature outward appearance, it was time to revisit Hong Kong. The practice entered a competition for a Hongkong Land development and Farrell based himself in the city for six weeks, plotting a future in this land full of potential. Another competition in 1991 gave him the break he'd been waiting for with the win of the Peak Tower and an enviable hat-trick of jobs followed, leading to the establishment of an office in the city. "The win enabled us to compete for the new British Consulate, which we won," recalls Farrell, "and then not long after we competed for Kowloon Station and won that too. It was a big undertaking."



PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES



PHOTOGRAPHY TINO TEDALDI



THE BEIJING SOUTH RAILWAY STATION

Set on a 31 hectare site, the Beijing South Station is one of four key railway links for China's high-speed intercity network. The station connects Beijing with the Yangtze River Delta cities of Tianjin and Shanghai, serving 285,000 passengers a day, with around 105m passengers predicted annually by 2030.

"IT IS NOT ALWAYS APPROPRIATE TO AIM TO BE ICONIC"

– Sir Terry Farrell

This is no exaggeration from Farrell. Kowloon Station was perhaps the most complicated of the three projects, thanks in part to the way in which Farrell, miraculously, managed to convince the rail operator to build the station as a grand hall rather than the 'mouse hole' style of station seen elsewhere in the city. The station's surrounding development is now home to 35,000 people as well as the International Commerce Centre, Hong Kong's tallest building.

It's now 25 years since Farrell's opened its offices here, and there are 100 staff members involved in projects all over Asia. "Hong Kong now is a more sophisticated place than it was back in 1991," says Farrell. "It's even more buoyant and successful. I think Hong Kong will find itself challenged by some cities in China, but the growth keeps going on and on." The company is contributing to one of the biggest arts centres in the world, the much-debated M+ in Kowloon, scheduled to open 2018-2019.

"[Herzog & de Meuron] were chosen to do it but they needed help locally so they approached us," he says. "To their credit, we've been involved in discussions from the very outset, but they are the design lead." That local knowledge has served Farrell's well, and they have been instrumental in many other buildings in the region, including the Beijing South Railway Station and Incheon International Airport.

For Farrell, Hong Kong provides the perfect natural backdrop for an architect. "The city has this unbelievably unique setting – all that water and the mountains; the skyscrapers sit at the bottom, as the only place to really build is on the edge of the coastline, so all the towers rise up and are seen against the mountains. It's not difficult to look wonderful in Hong Kong. It's like taking photographs in the sunshine. There are other cities in China with lots of skyscrapers, but with flat land and no water they don't work. They are amorphous and more spread out. Hong Kong has this incredible thin crust."

Farrell's head office is based in London, arguably another amorphous city, so how does that compare with this unique setting he admires in Hong Kong? "To some extent Hong Kong has it easy," Farrell concedes, "as their public transport runs where all the development is and it's in a very linear pattern, whereas London is spread out. Regardless, I think Hong Kong could teach London a lot about getting things done and about running public transport." London, however, has a special place in Farrell's heart and much has been made of his ability to nurture old buildings in the capital, something he is now exporting to Hong Kong.

"We have been working on the [new MTR station complex] in Kennedy Town ... it's like urban surgery – we've got new bits and old bits working together," he explains. "I think that's increasingly the case in Hong Kong. Herzog is doing the Central Police Station site [Tai Kwun, due to open in 2017], which is a wonderful example of nurturing; I went around it in April. It fits in with that area of town very well. As cities get more established and mature, there is more to work with. Hong Kong was a new city more or less after the Second World War, bar a few colonial buildings, but all these years later there is more to work on."

Given that Farrell strives to nurture buildings, it is perhaps not surprising that one of his bugbears is the occasional destruction of his work. "As a painter or a sculptor you don't expect your work to be totally abused during your lifetime. As an architect though, I've had quite a few buildings demolished, gone! And some hugely altered." The fact remains that, where architecture is concerned, somebody else is paying, which means letting go and accepting that original visions may change. A case in point for Farrell is the Peak Tower. "They've messed about with it. They filled in the legs – which were originally clear. They took bits off and added things on. I can't say whether they improved it or not, but what they've done with it is slightly incomprehensible. The essence of the Peak Tower is still there but I've had two or three buildings where you can't even work out what the original design intention was. The brief changes, budgets change, sizes change, everything changes; I've won competitions for art galleries that end up being shopping centres instead!"

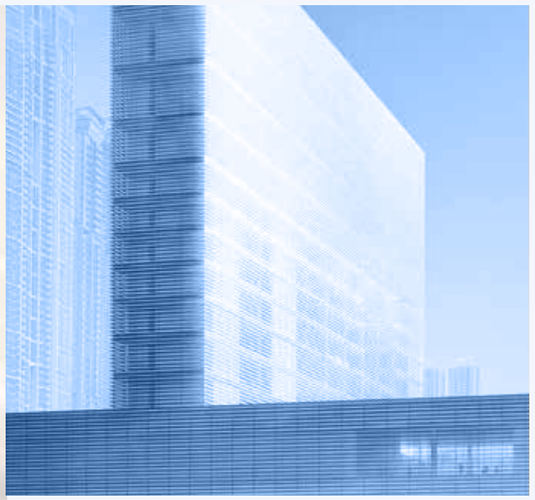
THE M+ MUSEUM INTERIOR DESIGN

TFP Farrells is working in partnership with Herzog & de Meuron and Arup Hong Kong to deliver M+, Hong Kong's proposed flagship museum for visual culture. M+ is to foster exchanges between the visual and performing arts. The 60,000-square metre museum building will house a wide range of display spaces to house the museum's collection, as well as research facilities, curatorial offices, artist-in-residence studios, and public restaurants behind a facade that incorporates an LED array serving as a massive display screen for works of art. It will "float" above a subterranean space excavated around the existing railway tunnels that run through Kowloon Railway Station.





COURTESY TERRY FARRELL





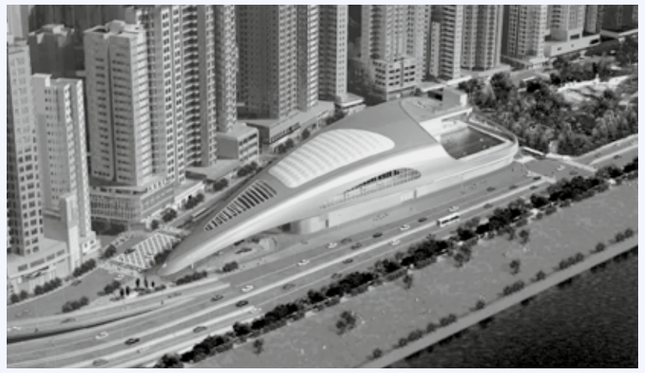
For Farrell, the desire for his creations to stick around is driven by passion, not ego. The same cannot be said for many of his contemporaries, many of whom are labelled as 'starchitects' in the media. "Just as pop singers in the last 30 years are no longer famous for singing songs but for being who they are, starchitects are the same," he says. "People seek them out the same as they might seek out having a painting by a famous artist on their wall. It's tantamount to saying, 'I've got a Picasso.'" It might not be what Farrell does, but he does understand why it happens. "I can see why people do it – we all enjoying reading and experiencing stars. There are stars in movies who are great and there are people who aren't stars, yet still make unbelievable movies."

Interestingly, and despite having created many famed buildings in his own right, Farrell is not a constant believer in 'icons' The UK press recently reported of his public disapproval of the Paddington Pole, planned by Renzo Piano, architect of much-lauded London skyscraper The Shard. "There are times when it's absolutely right to go for regular backdrop architecture – it is not always appropriate to aim to be iconic," explains Farrell. "I supported The Shard but the Paddington Pole was totally wrong in its setting, next to Hyde Park, in the middle of conservation areas. In an old city like London, there are places where you can really build tall buildings, but around the parks are not it." Farrell was clearly not alone in his view, and the project was recently scrapped after protests.

When it comes to his own home, Farrell has no complaints. After all, he created this particular masterpiece all by himself. Built in the 1920s, the art deco space in North London was originally a furniture factory, and was later taken over as an aircraft manufacturing plant during World War II. When Farrell acquired it in 1983, he originally based his practice there, but later moved the offices to the ground floor next door. It was the breakdown of his second marriage that led him to see it as a potential home. "When I became single again, I decided to make the space an apartment and moved in." The space, The Old Aeroworks, heavily references its past, with a battleship-grey metal staircase, corrugated steel roof and intricate model spitfires hanging from the ceiling, among endless other artefacts; including mesmerising artworks from his daughter Jo, an award-winning photographer, archival architectural models, exotic plants galore and goldfish swimming around in enormous bowls. It's the Spitfires, though, that really dominate.

"A friend told me about an old model aircraft he'd seen in an antiques shop in Islington, so I asked him to buy it," explains Farrell. "The next week, the same friend found another one in the same shop so I called them and it turned out they were selling a collection of 25, one at a time. They were all in a barn in Bristol. I sent two people from my office down to see them and they found 25 of them in wonderful condition. I bought the whole lot."

It seems fitting that today Farrell lives in this space, right next door to his office, with his Chinese wife of well over a decade, Mei Xin-wang who he describes as "the best thing to ever happen to me". China, it seems, may always have his heart.



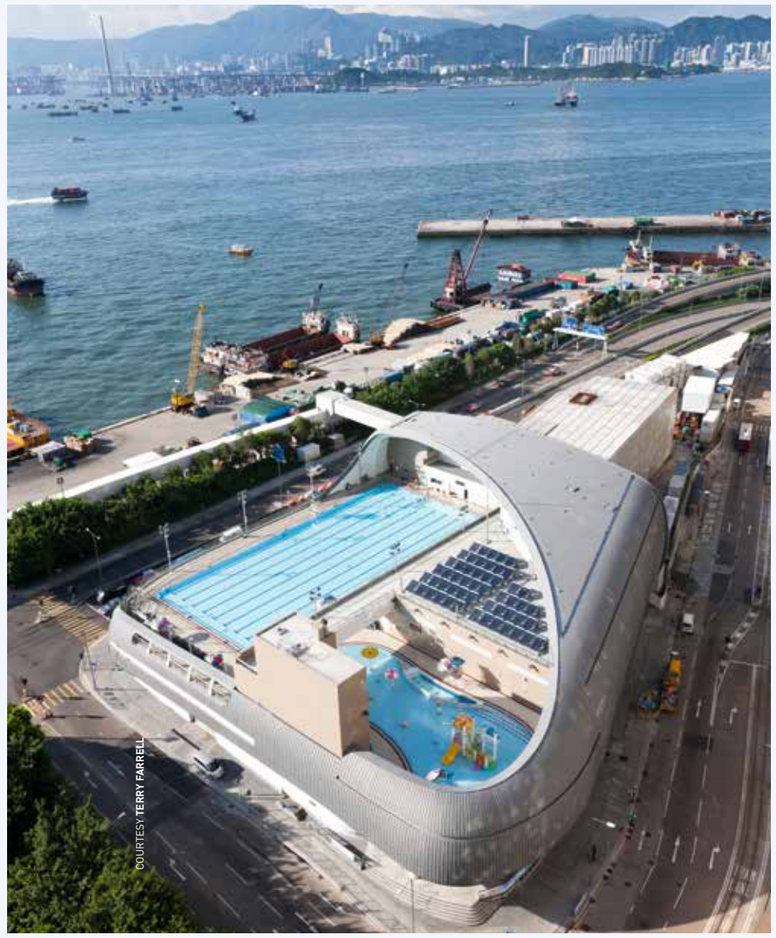
THE KENNEDY TOWN SWIMMING POOL

The original site chosen for Kennedy Town Station was the Forbes Street Playground. To draw residents to this neglected corner of an otherwise vibrant neighbourhood, the site demanded a memorable icon. During construction of the MTR West Island Line, the site adjacent to the first phase of the swimming pool was home to a shaft for the removal of underground material. Now that the railway line has opened, construction on the pool's second phase – featuring two indoor pools, a jacuzzi, and an outdoor garden – is underway. The facility is to be completed in 2017.



"I'VE WON COMPETITIONS FOR ART GALLERIES THAT END UP BEING SHOPPING CENTRES INSTEAD!"

– Sir Terry Farrell



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