

# Designer Address

Shanghai is fast becoming China's centre for industrial design. But its creative industries still have some way to go to win over the market

By Katrina Hamlin

**I**N 1997, SHANGHAI-BASED S.POINT became China's first ever privately-owned product design company. Just 14 years later, there are now over 58,000 creative design companies in Shanghai, employing around 488,000 people.

"The creative industry has enormous potential for development," said Hu Jintao during a visit to Shanghai's Bridge 8 design hub. The government hopes to capitalise on this potential to help China reach its goal of becoming an innovation-orientated economy by 2020.

But although China's creative design industry has grown at lightning speed over the past two decades, it is still maturing and remains little understood by other sectors and investors.

## Pride and Prejudice

Hu's words may seem positive, but, "This is the first time China's top leader has spoken highly of the creative industry," says Wang Rihua, from the Shanghai Industrial Design Association, a government organisation.

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There are now thousands of China-based designers. Pictured here: Designers from Kieferzapfen Design's Shanghai office.

In the past, and even to some extent today, the design industry had some negative associations in China.

"Initially, people involved in China's design scene tended to come from an art and craft background and usually had little connection with industry," says Liu Lidan, managing director of designaffairs China, and founder of XL+ Design, which merged with the German designaffairs earlier this year. "Likewise, in design school there were few teachers who had experience in industrial design." It wasn't until 2008 that "Art and Design" replaced "Art and Craft" as an official degree title in design education.

An impression of the designer as an artist stuck, and this has caused problems. Tony Wong, CEO of Lifestye Centre Holdings Ltd, the company behind the Bridge 8 commercial complex, which has supported 3,000 creative industry professionals since it opened creative work spaces in 2003, says, "Today, we are very well respected by the government, but a few years ago officials were quite unwilling to be seen or be associated with the design industry because it seemed so close to the art world, and cultural development is a very delicate issue."

It has also been difficult for business people to accept that a design service adds commercial value, not only aesthetic flair.

"There has been some initial resistance to understanding design as a service. At worst, it was considered unnecessary and at best, it was phased in, but left in the background," says Chris Hosmer, managing director of the design firm Continuum in Shanghai.

This artsy stereotype was enforced by manufacturers' willingness to include basic product design as a part of their work. "It's been hard to move away from

## DESIGNED TO WIN

Edmond Chau, creative director of the interior design group RPM Associates Ltd., explains how "service from the heart" helped RPM to scoop their award at China's Most Successful Design Awards 2011



**You're in Shanghai for China's Most Successful Design Awards, 2011. How did it go for RPM?**

**EC:** We were among the prize winners – in fact, we were one of very few interior design companies to receive an award, and from that small group, we were the only office design specialists to win a prize.

**Why do you think it was RPM who won?**

**EC:** We always focus on "service from the heart", achieving a good design while communicating with the client. That means speaking with key executives and also conducting our own research and analysis so that we really understand what we have to do. We invest a lot of time in getting this right during our preparations for a first design proposal, taking into account the client's history and needs – and once that's come together, we don't just stop; we ask for feedback so that the design keeps on improving all the way through the process.

A solid design concept, plus the user's input – that's our formula for success.

**Can you describe one of your most successful projects to date?**

**EC:** One of our favourites was the Synovate office. You can really see the attention to detail in that design – even down to the texture of the marble on the walls, the emphasis on a fresh colour scheme throughout the design, and the way that connects with their original logo and its specific colour scheme.

**So office spaces are your strength?**

**EC:** Commercial design is a strength, but that includes shop interiors as well as offices, and we also do residential properties. We're working on branding as well, extending the identity of the space to design co-ordinating product packaging or graphics for commercial spaces.

I see the market for branding on the mainland becoming particularly strong. It started small for us – one client asked for some graphic design after we'd taken on their interior design project. They wanted a complete, co-ordinated change with a consistent identity. Then we began branding, and now it's becoming a very interesting new focus for us as a company.



**Where do you do most of your work, and who are you working with?**

**EC:** At the moment we have three teams. There are two in Hong Kong – one specialises in commercial, the other in residential. On the mainland, we have one team. But they all work together. There's a lot of support from one office for another.

On the mainland, as our main designer I head up our team. I have more than 20 years experience now, so I can use that to build up our design capability and train our younger team members. It's a good mix of people, and we're expanding – we have a new designer who's just come over from France to start with us this month.

We're very picky about who we take on. There are three rounds of interviews for any one position, including practical design tests, and we really try to find the people who have the ability to develop the skills they already have.

**What are your plans for building on that in the future?**

**EC:** We have already grown quite a bit as a company. Since RPM was established in Hong Kong in 1999, we have expanded to become a team of over 60 people, and as I said we're still taking on new designers. We've also developed our client base. We now work with a lot of high-profile organisations, like the Body Shop, Swires, Cathay Pacific, Raffles, China Unicom, Fortune and Beijing Enterprise Holdings, to name a few.

We'd like to keep growing our team so we can take this further, but we also have other, specific goals. For instance, we'd like to open our own furniture factory so that we can be 100 per cent certain that we are sourcing the best products for our clients, and so that we can really commit when we promise quality.

We're also continuing to work on offering eco-friendly ideas to our clients. It goes beyond energy efficient systems and lighting – though that's a part of it – it's also about teaching the client how to use and maintain their space, with techniques such as working out how to rely on natural light as much as possible.

**What would you say is your priority for current and future products?**

**EC:** Every time, every project, is supposed to be a little like handling a baby – I mean, you have to be very careful, you have to take care to listen to the user's small needs and you must pay attention to detail. We say that we offer a "service from the heart", and that's what we mean by this. We think a lot about what the user needs, and what the user is thinking.



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