

THE STATUTE OF LIBERTY

BY ELIZABETH KERR
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Design Haus Liberty's Dara Huang discusses building a creative-industry business, 'good' design and maternity



Dara Huang admits she learned how to run an architecture firm from scratch



Glass Box gallery in Mayfair, London

Design Haus Liberty architect Dara Huang, one of the esteemed judges of the coming A&D Trophy Awards, is one of just a few people who could honestly joke about things not being rocket science. Not that she often refers to physics, but as a child born to Taiwanese parents in Florida where her father worked at NASA, she'd be well within her rights to throw the phrase around. Taking a break in a cafe at The Landmark in Central – she looks remarkably relaxed given she and her team are preparing for a major project pitch from DH Liberty's Hong Kong office – Huang admits she never really picked up her dad's scientific mind but still learned many lessons from him. "He taught me hard work, very much with an immigrant work ethic," she says.

"He always said, 'You have an Asian face, so you need to work twice as hard'. It's just the way the world is, sadly. It's funny. I'm here in Asia but I'm American so I still need to doubly prove myself."

It could be argued Huang has already proven herself as the founder and de facto creative director of London-based DH Liberty. Working in hospitality, residential, commercial, retail and urban regeneration for (among others) Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, InterContinental Hotels Group, Starwood Capital, LVMH, Knight Dragon, Emaar Properties, Cartier, Kate Spade and Harrods, Huang and DH Liberty can take credit for some 400 projects at various stages of completion all around the world, quite a feat for a firm that went from scrappy start-up to design and management innovator in just six years.



Kate Spade retail store on Regent Street in London



The refurbished office of Head in Soho, London

After graduating from Harvard Huang did an internship at Herzog de Meuron in Basel and later took a junior design position at Foster + Partners in London – a position she had to jockey for as her actual job at the time was in New York. “In 2008, I didn’t feel like I was quite done with Europe,” she explains. From there, Huang decided her own studio was the way to go and so did it the old-fashioned way: trial, error and paying attention at work. “When you get a degree in something creative they don’t really teach you business skills,” she says. “You have rose-coloured glasses on when you’re in architecture school. You think you’re going to graduate and become the next Rem Koolhaas,” she says, with a laugh. “You have no idea what a developer is. You have no idea what a cash flow look likes, or a budget or a projection. Hustling a little bit and mixing it with something creative and then dishing it out. This is business.”

Huang was the kind of creative kid who was drawing before speaking. A career in design was almost destiny,

but running her own firm was what she calls serendipity. Along with a single intern, Huang learned how to run an architecture firm from scratch, along the way picking up a management team that helped guide DH Liberty’s growth behind the scenes. As the studio gained traction in London, Huang discovered that specialists were the way to go for the long term. “I learnt that the generalists who scale you at the beginning are not the people who will scale you later. Now we have consultants and specialists for finance, contract writing, social media, everything,” she describes of the process that effectively made her redundant. “I went from wearing every hat to just two: generating clients and design vision.”

For Huang, that design vision is global, based in community and communication, and considers everything from the right light to our emotions. Huang prides herself on the fact that nearly all of approximately 30 people working at DH Liberty – including the graphic, product, furniture, interior and landscape designers –

all have architectural backgrounds, and is confident the studio runs better because of that. “It’s such an esoteric sector that you have to understand all the stages. The business of architecture is about ideas and time,” she argues. “Even when you get to site, when it becomes real, and even though it’s technical and tangible, it’s also 100 percent intuitional, because it’s all about passion and feelings and what looks good... it’s not just about the building. It’s about the life the building creates.”

“We just finished this amazing project in Italy, and it wasn’t the building that I was satisfied with. It was the life and the feeling and the vibrancy and the energy that it created, and watching people react to the environment. I think that’s what so special about architecture... it’s the soft aspects that make good architecture, and it’s visceral. If you walk onto a street, up a mountain or into a cathedral, any space, and you gasp when it literally takes your breath away – nothing is more powerful than that feeling because of what’s around you. That’s what we try

to do: create incredible environments that make you feel. Spaces you don’t have to speak about because [they] speak to you. This is good design.”

Huang is also actively creating an incredible work environment too. Asked if architecture is still a boys’ club and you get a quick, “For sure!” But when she became a mother herself, she picked up her game and decided DH Liberty would lead by example. “I put all sorts of energy into taking care of my company and now my company is taking care of me. Women need to be able to take care of themselves and to carry their own platforms, and it is challenging. It takes exceptional bosses, too, to change mentality and mind-sets. It’s 2019!” she scoffs. Working mothers at DH Liberty are offered flexible working hours and a crèche is planned for the studio’s new office when it moves in the near future: she doesn’t want to lose design talent because a woman doesn’t even bother with a job interview because she’s considering having children. Huang mentors young women architects and designers as



Sumptuous materials were used in Villa Mosca Bianca



Built around a central garden, Villa Mosca Bianca overlooks Lake Maggiore in Lesa, Italy

much as possible, and laments the talent in the academic arena (where the gender breakdown is relatively even) that is lost to reality when issues of childcare come along, and the continuing dearth of women at management levels.

“There’s a lot of pressure on women to have families but the pay isn’t enough to justify going back to a job. Women face a lot of consequences. I’m not saying I have all the answers but it’s about partnerships, responsibility, affordability of care... something’s got to give and we need to figure it out. We need to find a way to accommodate women. And it’s not about ‘Can women have it all?’ It’s a matter of can they have what they want? We need to allow women to do what they want and get rid of expectations. Men have been able to do that forever; women don’t value themselves as much as men do. And we need to stop that.”

In the meantime, Huang and her crew are getting ready for their pitch and keeping tabs on the latest DH Liberty project under construction, a 50-storey mixed-use tower in Guangzhou. “It’s an exciting fashion-sector client and they put no constraints on anything. So, for us, that’s just incredible. They really appreciate design and architecture so we’ve got swooping staircases, pixelated walls, a four-

storey installation piece. It’s a great spectacle.” Tapping into her democratic vein, Huang co-founded Vivahouse with Rajdeep Gahir and, at the end of 2018, unveiled the world’s first pop-up residences: pre-fabricated, flat pack internal modular housing that takes advantage of vacant urban commercial spaces. She’s putting her signature warm, welcoming and outside-the-box interiors on two towers at Knight Dragon’s Greenwich Peninsula in London. And that Italian villa stands out. “The floor plan is in the shape of a flower, so each room juts out into a different part of the landscape. It faces the water, so it’s amazing how the house changes continuously throughout the day. We put poles all around, so as the sun moves the shadows move across the floor, making something static dynamic.” DH Liberty has plenty of diverse projects on its plate for 2019, but Huang’s personal bucket list involves designing for the public realm. “We all want to design spaces that change the world, but so many are private. I’d like to get into the cultural and civic design: a theatre, a plaza, a museum,” she says. “It’s the true architectural expression of art. For everyone.” ■

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