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Keith Griffiths' Adventures in Architecture

April 2021

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Video

Keith Griffiths

*The many tales of Keith Griffiths, founder of Aedas,
one of Hong Kong's leading architectural practices*



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orld-famous architect and educator Keith Griffiths, founder of the Aedas architecture firm, on his small-town Welsh roots, design journey, opinions on Hong Kong's infrastructure and more...

You were born a world away from Hong Kong in Wales...

Yes. I'm completely a country mouse. I grew up in a tiny village called Merthyr Tydfil on the west coast of Wales. Home to just 1,400 people, it's as far west as you can go before you drop into the Atlantic Ocean. It was very barren but also very beautiful. Set on a peninsula measuring six miles by one mile, that was my whole life while growing up. Although the education I received and the atmosphere were great, frankly it was an extremely boring place to be young. In the end, I couldn't wait to get away.

It was a seminal experience, though, and it taught me how to communicate. Given its tiny size – our school had just 300 children – I had to learn how to deal with any situation, how to problem-solve and how to see the best in people. After all, you need to deal with them in any case. Leaving there, when I was 17, was a relief, though.

And where did you leave for?

I ran east, initially to Cambridge University, where I spent six years. It was a great introduction to wider society and I really enjoyed the experience. I then moved to London – finally a big city with a rich culture, architectural traditions and international influences. I was there for five years until famed British architect Norman Foster sent me to Hong Kong in 1983 to look after the HSBC project. I've been here ever since.

What made you decide to settle here?

It was down to two factors really. First of all, in 1985, when the HSBC Building project was completed, Hong Kong was just recovering from the 1982 economic collapse. There was a lot of optimism in the air and a surplus of work opportunities. It was very different to the UK, where the economy had all but stagnated. At the same time, the Falkland War was going on and I had a real issue with what I saw as a political conflict and a gambit for Margaret Thatcher to hold onto power. Removed from the situation, I could see things dispassionately and perceive it as the humanitarian crisis it truly was.



“While my education in Wales was great, it was an extremely boring place to be young”

Ultimately, then I decided Hong Kong was my best option when it came to creating a life for myself.

This all led, eventually, to you founding Aedas, your own architectural firm...

I founded Aedas about 30 years ago and we've since spread out across the world. When we first started we were very small, but we grew quickly. This was partly because we took on a lot of infrastructure projects such as railway and airport work, which, in the '80s, saw us move into South East Asia, then the Middle East and finally China. We now work across the board in every area of design, including mixed-use infrastructure, museums, hotels – you name it, we do it as we're now a big group. Overall, we have about 1,200 staff, most of whom work either in China or Hong Kong.

What do you see as your USP?

One of the factors in our success is that we like our architecture to be relevant to the city we're designing for. In order to accomplish this, we really need to understand the culture, the people and the climate. So, every time we pick up a major project we set up a local office, which is why we are now active in 12 locations around the world. It's this desire to really understand the place we're designing for – rather than just importing a generic international style of building – that makes us different.





What are the challenges that come with running such a multinational business?

Actually, running Aedas is surprisingly easy. We're designers and designers communicate through design. If you try to run designers through management tools, you'll fail – it would be like herding cats. So, instead, we use design tools. We don't have any professional managers as everyone at Aedas is either an architect, an interior designer or an urban planner. Our directors are also similarly qualified, so everyone speaks the same language, regardless of their background. This really enhances our communication capabilities, which in turn yields big rewards in terms of our completed projects.

Over the years, have there been some project that were particularly close to your heart?

In our three decades of operation, we've designed many, many buildings. It is, however, true to say that you always believe the building you're currently working on is going to be the best. If it's not, then you've done something wrong as you should be looking to improve all the time. So in terms of the buildings I'm particularly proud of, it's always going to be the most recent ones – most notably, the West Kowloon Train Terminus, a world-class building and the gateway between Hong Kong and the mainland.

How do you decide which projects are right for you and Aedas?

Architects tend to be very humble, so we rarely turn a project down. Generally, though, we have a business development team whose job is to source our projects. Sometimes they bring direct commissions – which account for about 40 percent of our overall business – other times they propose we participate in design pitches, which make up another 40 percent of our work, with the balance coming from work for previous clients.

Focusing more locally, what do you see as Hong Kong's unique architectural challenges?

The thing to remember about Hong Kong is that it was the world's first extreme high-density, high-rise city, making it all but inevitable that a number of issues are going to arise. Among these, the biggest problem is land use. In total, just 25 percent of its land has been developed, with only seven percent allocated to residential buildings. By comparison, Singapore has used 30 percent of its available space for or residential properties, a move that is

“Hong Kong is still stuck in an infrastructural mindset that dates all the way back to the '80s”

reflected in its bigger apartment sizes and wider availability of property.

Moving to architecture, we've had some significantly good developments over recent years, including such world-leading designs like the new M+ project and the revamped Tai Kwun compound. Hong Kong was also the first to introduce live-work hubs as the norm, as embodied by such neighbourhoods as Central, Soho and Shatin, while also being in the podium-and-tower style of design. We are, however, still stuck in an infrastructural mindset that was first introduced in the '80s, and I think we need to evolve and produce new types of buildings, which can better meet the needs of this high-density, high-rise city.

Looking to the future, what projects are you particularly anticipating?

We actually have a number of exciting projects in the pipeline. We've been very successful recently in securing several government projects in Shenzhen. We're also working on a number of headquarter buildings in its business district, which are truly world-class creations. The regulations in Shenzhen are rather different from those elsewhere in China, so we've been able to do some really interesting architectural designs. We've also been working on a new border-crossing facility at Huanggang – between Hong Kong and the mainland – which is a very large building and something I'm definitely proud of. In all, we have about 100 live projects in China, though, so it's hard to single out just a few. ■

Thank you. ■

