

Kyoob-ID's design director, Michelle Goh talks about her design journey and how she succeeds in the competitive interior design industry.

BY WONG YEN SAN

## STEEL and PASSION



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CLASSROOM



A good interior design is more than creativity and aesthetics as Michelle Goh, design director and major shareholder of Kyooob-ID, a local boutique architectural interior design company would attest. Instead, it's an amalgam of function and design aesthetics. Listening to the client to understand his point of view and operational needs is paramount in the commercial interior design industry. "You must understand what makes them think this way and then come up with solutions to meet their requirements. Aesthetics will then come in to embrace the problem," says Goh.

This might mean putting herself in the space during the designing phase or running through the service procedure countless times in order to come up with the ideal spatial plan. Which was what happened during her design project for Mahkota Medical Centre, one of Malaysia's leading and busiest tertiary hospitals in the Southern Peninsula – Goh personally went through the health screening procedure before coming up with an enhanced spatial flow for the centre's outpatients.

It's her dedication to her work as well as an unwavering passion that sees Goh succeed and thrive in the commercial interior design industry. A veteran with close to 30 years of experience, Goh today manages Kyooob-ID which services clientele from diverse industries including Eagle Eye Centre, ITE, Nanyang Poly, SATS, Ministry of Transport, Xpress Holdings, Eu Yan Sang, and Alpha Investment Partners among many others. Kyooob-ID's architectural arm is Kyooob Architects, which is headed by partners Julian Chia and Chee Meng.

#### **A design odyssey of drive and passion**

Goh's inroads into interior design were deliberate and planned from the start. "I know I wanted to go into interior design. Opportunity doesn't come so easily so I tried to 'path' myself," Goh adds. From a burning interest in the arts during Secondary School where she excelled, she went on to join CK Tang as a display artist after leaving school.

The opportunity to join Pico Art as a designer came swiftly and Goh took on the challenge despite her lack of design training at that time. Because it was entirely on-the-job training, Goh recounted she had to put in more than 12 hours daily including weekends for a year before she mastered the ropes to stop doing overtime. During the time when there was no autocad, Goh had to draw everything by hand. Still, being resourceful and driven by nature, she succeeded in rolling out some major-scale projects such as the MPH Book Pavilion, Orchard Road Christmas Light-up, and product launches for fashion brands like FENDI.



Passionate about design, Goh then jumped on the chance to partner in an interior design venture. Goh, then in her early 20s, together with a partner, set up an interior design firm to cater mainly to retail and hospitality clients, counting Bonia, Harley Davidson, and Famous Amos as some of her regular clients. The partnership was later split, leaving her to manage the company on her own for about 10 years. After a good decade, she decided to close down the business and headed back for the workforce, joining regional and global firms Boss Design, MMoser Associates and then DB&B Design as senior design manager handling project management. It was a blast because she had the opportunity to work with different clientele including MNCs and various government bodies on projects worth millions of dollars. Clients like the AXA Group, Hewlett Packard, Land Transport Authority, and Singtel to name a few. It was also during this time that Goh was roped in by Julian and Chee Meng to set up Kyooob-ID. That was in 2009.

"To look back at my history, from doing retail to my own little business and then back to work, I take this as a learning curve – the problems we foresee, how to manage it – and along the way we learnt different things. With this experience I try to combine the knowledge I have to manage Kyooob-ID," shares Goh.

#### **Against the odds**

What was it that made her stay in the industry for so long? "It's a passion for me. I don't take my job as a job. Everything is an interest and I consider myself very blessed to be able to do something that I like and get paid for," Goh smilingly adds, "I can be very tired but the minute I sit down with a client for example to talk about design, I'd wake up in an instant. It's not a job to me at all."

It's perhaps this passion and drive that sees Goh achieve success after success despite the odds. One of this when she was appointed as regional architect for Porsche Asia Pacific (AP) in 2001, a position she subsequently held for a full decade while she was in DB&B. As regional architect, she had to

ensure that the guidelines of Porsche's corporate identity and requirements were fully met in the showrooms and service centres throughout AP.

"At first, we did the regional branch office for Porsche following their entry into Singapore. They were very happy with the result, and they appointed me as regional architect for AP in the same year," says Goh, despite her lack of formal training in design or architecture. "I think they picked me because I have the eye for detail. I may not be architecturally trained but in terms of interior I have the eye for detail, and I know what looks good and what is functional in terms of planning," Goh adds, "Because I'm not governed by any school of thought such as in architecture, I've the ability to think freely and out of the norm. Somehow there's no restriction."

#### Her success factors

Out-of-the-box thinking aside, Goh credits her success today to her perseverance and positivity. Goh humbly shares, "I don't think that I'll never give up but whenever I face a difficult problem, I'll always tell myself to go through it and the matter will pass. I don't know if it is optimism but I just know that the problem will eventually pass." On top of that, Goh practises an open and facilitative culture in her company, believes in team work, and empowers her staff in decision making.

Goh, in her forties, also believes one has to be sincere in business. And it's one of the attributes that make her the preferred interior working partner for many of her clientele judging from the repeat business she gets from clients who have followed her through these years. Many of her clients have since turned into golfing buddies or bosom friends. Certainly not an easy feat to attain in this competitive industry.

#### Design trends

On her views of the interior industry trends, the industry veteran feels that the environment tends to be more open perhaps because of a change in business modules. "Everything is about interaction and there's a focus on staff well-being as well. I'd say it's a more balanced interior now... There is also a progression towards making our offices green."



#### Niche designs

What's next for this strong-willed lady? Goh believes foremost in churning quality design work rather than just focusing on expansion out of local shores. "It'd be good if we get to move regionally but I don't want to be just another company where I've to be big to do big projects. I want us to focus on our niche to produce creative and quality design work."

Goh, who admitted to being more mellowed, has this advice for those interested to set up their own interior design firms. "If it's a partnership, you have to be very open with each other. All has to be discussed and in business, nothing goes smoothly. And if you really want to try, then try. It may be a struggle but it's a learning experience. Better than you don't try and regret it later."

An avid golfer in the past, Goh now unwinds mostly by running. "Running is freedom. You don't have to think of anything, you just run. And when you feel like stopping, you just stop." Goh is into endurance running right now. And just last year, she achieved her goal of completing a full marathon (run by Standard Chartered) before she hit 50.

Travelling is another hobby Goh enjoys. "I consider myself free spirited in a way. If I decide to go travelling next week, I'll go. I'm fortunate to have a sister who doubles as my travelling companion" smiles Goh, who is a firm believer in a balanced lifestyle. Indeed, as what Goh says: "When it's time to work, work. When it comes to have a life, have a life."

