

Growing a business that lasts generations

Having expanded his parents' architectural business, Ong Tze Boon is positioning ONG&ONG for success long after he is gone. BY FRANCIS KAN

WHEN Ong Tze Boon's parents died within three years of each other on either side of the new millennium, he was left in a quandary over what to do with the successful architectural firm the couple had founded.

He had bigger boots to fill than most; his father was the late president Ong Teng Cheong, who had set up ONG&ONG with his wife Ling Siew Mei in 1972.

Mrs Ong, who had run the firm in her later years, passed away in 1999, while her husband died in 2002.

Their son, a US-trained architect who joined the firm in 1994, not only had to deal with a deeply personal loss, but also find a way to win new business to sustain the practice and its employees.

It didn't help that this transition was occurring during the start of a turbulent decade for Singapore; the country had just come out of the Asian Financial Crisis, while the 9/11 attacks, Sars epidemic and Global Financial Crisis were lying in wait.

"If it took a Mrs Ong Teng Cheong and her gravity to run a practice with 62 employees, what assurances could a 29-year-old boy give to a client with a S\$100 million condo project? Why would they give it to someone who is possibly the peer of their own children? It was a very difficult time," recalls Mr Ong, now 52.

Beyond survival, another pressing issue was the need to carry on the legacy of a storied firm and its esteemed founders.

"I needed to figure out what to do with the company. Taking over is one thing, but then what? That's a big question, and if you cannot answer it then you don't take over."

"If you take over and you think it's going to end, then you're just kicking the tin can down the road. You're not really solving the legacy issue. Of course, my parents had their own personal legacy, but ONG&ONG also has a legacy and therefore its own life."

Choosing the right path

To answer these questions, Mr Ong came up with three possible directions for the firm. The first involved transforming ONG&ONG into a smaller boutique outfit offering more cutting-edge design services. The second was to hold the fort and do his best to keep the firm at status quo with its 62 employees.

While he felt that the second option was better than the first, he was

mindful of being criticised for not building on what his parents had left him. As such, he settled on a third option.

"If you see the options I was faced with when I was 29, if I wanted to see any favourable outcome, the only real option I had was to scale the business. I had to somehow figure out how to have a business continuity plan for a family business to transcend my parents' time, and hopefully to transcend my time," he says.

His end goal was to put ONG&ONG in a position to thrive in perpetuity by achieving a certain scale that would attract the necessary talent to run the growing business.

"For the company to carry on in perpetuity, it needs to have a certain scale before you can hire a full C-Suite. So the computation in my head is, 'What do we do to ensure continuity and perpetuity for the brand name ONG&ONG'. And in that calculation, the outcome is a corporate legacy."

With the end goal clear, Mr Ong then embarked on a journey fraught with risks and uncertainties, but which 20 years on has seen him grow the company into a fully integrated design powerhouse, with over 700 employees and overseas offices in six countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam).

In recent years, the firm has won industry awards for residential projects such as Jadescape in Singapore and Grandezza in Malaysia, as well as civic and infrastructure developments, including Heartbeat@Bedok and Macpherson MRT station.

With its rapid growth over the past two decades, Mr Ong feels that he is today approaching the goal of positioning ONG&ONG to carry on without him. "If I feel that I've arrived at the point where, even without me, the company can continue, I think it would be ready. And that in itself is its legacy."

"After 20 years I can say I'm more than half to two-thirds of the way there, but I still have a little bit to go. I may be short when I go, but at least I would have come, let's say, 90 per cent of the way."

A business model borne out of necessity

While ONG&ONG has seen much success since he took over the reins, the challenges at the start of Mr Ong's journey were daunting. While his mother had to secure three architectural projects to sustain 62 employees, he believed that just getting one would require a minor miracle.

"So I thought, let's just focus on getting one project rather than being spread thinly with three clients, and then persuade the client to not only let us do the architecture, but possibly also the interior design, and also the landscape design."

"In other words, can I get more fees out of the same one project as opposed to the same fees out of three projects," he explains.

"The first project came from Far East Organization, and I will be eternally grateful to them. So we got landscape, we got interior, and that was enough to hold our family of 62 employees. I was in survival mode. It wasn't like I had a grand plan, but I had a free hand to introduce interior design and landscape and by doing what I did, I inadvertently created integrated services."

Doubling down at the right time

ONG&ONG grew from strength to strength following that initial breakthrough, as Mr Ong was able to leverage his firm's integrated services model to expand. This has required him to bet big on promising opportunities, while trying to minimise losses on punts that have not paid off.

"A good poker player is not the one that wins every hand. A good poker player is the one that doubles down at the right time and calls it quits when it's obvious that it's the wrong hand. I think we have had more hands that have won than hands that have lost," he says.

Having taken over a young age, however, Mr Ong did not have the experience to know exactly which opportunities to go all in on. Instead, in those early days, he had to rely on his gut instincts, as well as a little help from an unexpected source.

"When I wake up in the morning and walk into the office at 9am, there's no more time and I have to make a decision whether to do or not to do (a project)."

"I cannot fathom what makes me decide that I should double down. I'm not spiritual in that sense, but I think I'm guided. I'd like to believe that maybe mum and dad are looking down and whispering to my ear when I'm asleep."

Some of ONG&ONG's biggest wins have come from the firm's decision to expand beyond the shores of Singapore. The firm now has a significant presence in several countries in the region, including Vietnam and Malaysia. In Vietnam, ONG&ONG has about 200 employees – of which only one is Singaporean – and is the only foreign architectural firm from Singapore to have practising licences in all the disciplines.

Mr Ong describes the firm's approach to internationalisation as bringing global knowledge locally. "The goal is to grow our presence in the local market as a local firm with a local flavour and a local output."

More than just work

Beyond his work, Mr Ong believes that he also has an obligation to give back to society in other ways. To him, the success of a personal legacy can be measured by the number of people a person has impacted whom they've never met.

"So the question is, what can I possibly do in my lifetime that can impact others whom I've never met. And I've come to terms that running ONG&ONG is not the answer. I'm not one who believes that public good means I make a lot of money and I donate money."



Mr Ong (above) has grown the company into a fully integrated design powerhouse that has won awards for projects such as Heartbeat@Bedok (left). PHOTOS: ONG&ONG



PHOTOS: ONG&ONG

Leaving your mark on the family business

TAKING over the running of a family business is a heavy responsibility for next-generation leaders.

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Mr Ong is heavily involved in philanthropy through the ONG Foundation, which he established based on his passion for endurance sports to raise both funds and awareness for several notable social causes.

Last year, he was also the co-chairman of Relay Majulah, an initiative that challenged 200 runners to complete a nationwide relay in 200 hours. The event raised more than S\$1.6 million in support of the 67 charities under the President's Challenge, exceeding its target of S\$1 million.

He says: "This is an example of the little things that I do that will actually lend a different kind of personal legacy than ONG&ONG's legacy."

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